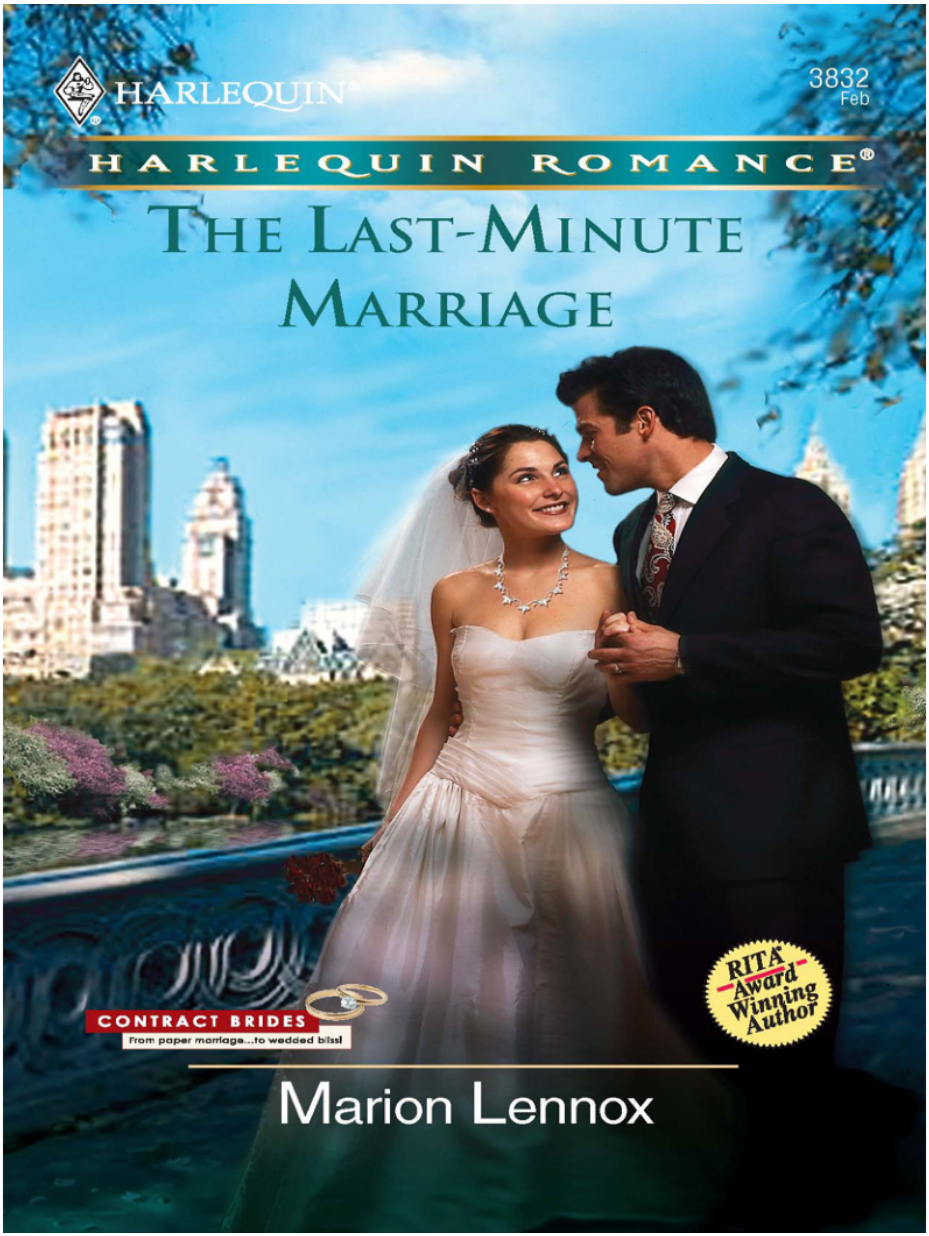
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From paper marriage...to wedded bliss!
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They were left alone. The lights were dim.

He was standing in the hallway, holding a girl in his armsâhis brideâand she was gazing up at him with eyes that were luminescent, trembling, sweetly innocent.

She was so desirable. And she was his wife! He could kiss her right nowâ¦.

âCut it out,â she told him, jerking her face back from his and jiggling in his arms. âMarcus Benson, put me down. Right now.â

âI thoughtââ

âI know what you thought. I can read it in your eyes.â

âPetaâ¦?â

âI knew youâd want something.â She bounced and wriggled some more and he was forced to set her down.

âI donât want anything.â

She fixed him with an old-fashioned look. âYouâre saying you donât want to take me to bed?â

There was nothing heâd like better.

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CHAPTER ONE

MARCUS BENSON shoved open the fire-escape doorâand ran straight into Cinderella.

Marcus running into anyone was unusual in itself. The influence of the Benson Corporation reached throughout the international business community, and Marcus, at its head, was a man held in awe. Bumping into people was unheard of. A path usually cleared before him.

It wasnât just power, wealth and intellect contributing to the aura surrounding him. He was in his mid-thirties, tall and superbly fit, with jet-black hair and striking, hawklike features. His charisma and influence were such that womenâs magazines were unanimous in declaring him to be Americaâs most eligible bachelor.

And Marcus was likely to stay that way.

Well, why not? His experience of family life had been a disaster. His time in the armed forces had taught him loyalty and friendship, but loyalty and friendship had ended in tragedy. So Marcus Benson was a man who walked alone.

But that was before he met Peta OâShannassy.

And Petaâs kids, dogs, cows and catastrophe.

He didnât see that now, though. All he saw was a kid who reminded him oddly of Cinderella.

But Cinderella should be in her castle kitchen, tending the fire. Hungry. Wasnât that how the story went? Surely she shouldnât be eating her lunch on the landing of a New York fire-escape.

Maybe Marcus was making a few assumptions. He assumed this was Cinderella. He assumed it was lunch. In reality, all Marcus saw was a spilled yellow drink, a flying bagel, and, underneath, a tattered kid with bright chestnut curls and skimpy clothes.

So maybe she wasnât Cinderella.

Who, then? A street kid? She was wearing shorts, a frayed T-shirt and battered sandals. His first impression was of a waif.

His second sensation was horror as waifâand lunchâfought for

balance, lost, and tumbled to the next landing.

What had he done?

Heâd been in too much of a hurry. There werenât enough hours in the day for Marcus Benson. He had people waiting.

Theyâd have to wait. Heâd just knocked a kid down half a flight of stairs. She was crumpled in a heap on the next landing, looking as if she wasnât going anywhere.

It seemed an eternity while she slid, but in fact it was two or three seconds at most. The next moment, Marcus was brushing the bright curls away from her face. Trying to see the damage.

Again he had to do a rethink. She wasnât a street kidâor not the type that he recognised.

She was clean. Sure, she was covered in what remained of her bagel and her milkshake, but her mop of curls were soft to touch. Her shorts and her T-shirt were freshly laundered under the mess heâd made, and she wasâ¦

Cute?

Definitely cute.

She wasnât a kid.

Maybe she was about twenty, he thought. Her eyes were closed but he had the impression that it wasnât unconsciousness that was causing her eyelids to stay shuttered. There was a sense of exhaustion about her, as if she was closing her eyes to shut out more than the pain and shock of the moment. Dark shadows smudged deeply under her eyes. She was thin. Far too thin.

His first impression solidified. Cinderella.

Her eyes fluttered open. They were wide green eyes, deep and questioning. Pain-filled.

âDonât move,â he said urgently and she focused on his face, questioning.

âOuch,â she whispered.

âOuch?â

She appeared to consider.

âDefinitely ouch,â she said at last, and the strain in her voice said she was trying hard to make light of something that was worse than just ouch. She didnât move; just lay on the steel-plated landing as if she was trying to come to terms with a catastrophe that was just one of a series. âI guess I spilled my milkshake, huh.â

âUmâ¦â He looked down to the next flight of steps. âYeah. Definitely.â

âAnd my bagel?â Her accent was Australian, he thought. It was warm and resonant, with a tremor behind it. From shock? From pain?

But she was worried about her bagel. He smiled at that, albeit weakly. If she was worried about her bagel, chances were that she wasnât suffering injuries that were life-threatening.

âIâd imagine your bagel is at ground level,â he told her. âItâll have turned into a lethal missile by now.â

âOh, great.â She closed her eyes again and his impression of exhaustion deepened. âI can see the headlines. Australian drops New Yorker with jelly-loaded bagel. Iâll probably get sent to prison-for-terrorists on the first flight out of here.â

âHey.â It was too much. Marcus Benson, who seldomâwell, *never,* in factâlet himself get involved, put his hand on her cheek in a gesture of comfort. Good grief. Heâd blasted her down a flight of stairs. Heâd ruined her lunch. Heâd hurt herâand she was trying to turn it into a joke.

âAustralian Braining New Yorker with Bagel is the least of our legal worries,â he told her. âHow about Corporate Idiot Shoves Australian Downstairs?â

She opened one eye and looked up at him. Cautiously. âYou mean I can sue?â

âFor at least the cost of a bagel,â he told her, and his words produced a smile.

It was a great smile. A killer smile. Her eyes were deeply green and they twinkled, as if it was their permanent state. Maybe she wasnât twenty, he thought. Maybe she was older. With a smile like thatâ¦ Well, a smile like that took practice.

Heâd never seen a smile like it.

But he couldnât stop and think about a womanâs smile. Or he shouldnât. He was in a rush. The reason heâd used the fire stairs was that he was in a hurry. The lift had jammed at just the wrong time. His assistant would be waiting at street level, checking her watch. He had a deal to close.

But he couldnât just leave this kid here.

He lifted his cellphone. âRuby?â he snapped as his assistant answered.

âMarcus.â This was a busy day, even for the super-efficient Ruby, and his assistant sounded worried. âWhere are you?â

âIâm on the fire-escape. Can you come up, please? I have a situation.â

As he tucked his phone back into his jacket he found himself suppressing a grin. A situation on the fire-escape. Thatâd have Ruby having kittens all the way up. Ruby was efficient but things likeâ¦well, situations on fire-escapes were unusual, even for Ruby.

Sheâd cope, he thought. Ruby always coped. But until the cavalry arrived he needed to focus on the girl.

âAre you hurt?â he asked, and found she was staring straight up at him now, both her eyes fully open. Sheâd rolled over on to her back. There was a dollop of jelly wedged under her curls near one ear, and he had the weirdest desire to wipe it awayâ¦

Heck, cut it out, Benson, he told himself. This was getting personal. He didnât do personal. That was what Ruby was for.

But apparently the waif didnât want his attention just as much as he didnât wish to offer it. âThank you for asking,â she said politely. âBut Iâm fine. You can go away now.â

He blinked. âI can go away?â

âYouâre in a rush. I sat in your way. Youâve squashed my bagel, youâve spilled my milkshake and youâve hurt my ankle, but hey, itâs my fault. Iâmââ

âYouâve hurt your ankle?â

âIt appears,â she said with cautious dignity, âto be hurt.â

He checked her out. Her legs were long and tanned and smooth. Really long, in fact, and really tanned, and really smooth. They were great legs. It was incongruous that they ended up with shabby leather sandals that looked as if they came from a welfare shop.

The shoes werenât the only jarring note. One ankle was puffing while he watched.

âHell.â

âHey! Itâs me whoâs supposed to swear. Why donât you just go away so that I can?â

âDonât let me stop you.â

âA lady doesnât swear in front of a gentleman,â she told him, lifting her ankle so she could see it. Mistake. She winced and let

it drop. Cautiously. But still the determination was there to move on. Ignoring pain. âWhile I might not be a lady, by the look of the suit youâre wearing, you must be a gentleman,â she managed. âThatâs about the most gentlemanly suit Iâve ever seen.â

Here they were again. Talking about him. He found himself glancing down at his Armani suit and thinking, Yeah, thatâs all it took. Wear a suit that cost a few thouâ and bang, youâre a gentleman.

Even if he did toss kids downstairs.

âIâm really sorry,â he told her, and she nodded as if sheâd been waiting for it.

âI wondered when weâd get around to that.â

She took him aback. It wasnât just her accent that was unusual, he decided. It was everything about her. She was hurtingâhurting badly. He could see it behind her eyes. But she wasnât letting on. She was sassy and smart, and she wanted him to disappear so she could swear in private. Or do whatever she had to do in private.

âIs it only your ankle thatâs hurting?â he asked.

âIsnât that enough?â

âI guess it is.â He touched her foot, lightly probing, and saw that it hurt. A lot. âThat was quite a fall.â

âYou thumped out of there hard.â

âI guess I did.â

âIâm fine,â she said, and he knew that, though she was trying to keep things light, there was a load of bitterness behind the words. âLeave me be.â

âThat ankle might be broken.â

âYeah, with my luckâ¦â She broke off and seemed to try to haul herself together. She even managed to produce that smile again. Almost. âNo. Donât worry. Itâd be hurting more if it was broken.â

âCan I help you inside?â He motioned to the door heâd just come from.

âTo the offices of Charles Higgins?â Her eyebrows hiked up in mock incredulity. âAttila in there wouldnât let me sit on her settee and eat my bagel. You think sheâll let me sit on her settee now Iâm covered with banana milkshake?â

âI guess she wouldnât,â he said, his voice a trifle unsteady.

Attilaâ¦ He knew exactly who she was talking about. Charles Higginsâs secretary.

âYou were waiting to see Charles?â

âYeah.â

Marcus knew Charles Higgins. The man was sleaze. A king-sized ego with the morals of a sewer rat. Because of renovationsâthe same renovations that were causing problems with the lifts nowâMarcus had been forced to share a corporate washroom with Charles Higgins for the last few weeks. But that was as far as their relationship went. The manâs brains were in his balls. He had a reputation for dealing dishonestly with dishonest money.

Marcus owned this building. He might lease part of it to Higgins but it didnât mean he had to like the man.

He couldnât understand for a minute what business this girl would have with a slime-ball of a lawyer like Higgins.

âYou had an appointment?â

âAt ten this morning. Three hours ago.â She was still lying on the landing, her fingers tentatively probing her ankle. âAttila keeps fobbing me off. Finally I was so hungry I dived out and got lunch and Attila told me Iâd have to eat out here. Enter you.â

That made sense. Higginsâs secretary, a woman of indeterminate years and with a bosom like plate armour, had a reputation for being nastier than Higgins himself. If that was possible.

âYou knowâ¦â It was a crazy conversation. Any minute now Ruby would arrive and rescue him, but meanwhile maybe he could give her a bit of advice. It couldnât hurt. âYou know, maybe if you want to talk to high-powered New York lawyers, then maybe shorts and T-shirt and scruffy sandals arenât going to cut it.â

âScruffyâ¦â She probed her ankle and winced yet again but she was able to focus on what he was saying. âYouâre saying my sandals are scruffy?â

âYes,â he said firmly, and he almost got that smile again. Not quite. She was in real pain, he thought. Where on earth was Ruby? âScruffy is a polite way of describing them, really.â

âTheyâre my auntyâs.â

âUmâ¦good?â

âSheâs dead,â the girl said as if that explained all. It didnât.

But he had to say something.

âOh,â he said and this time he definitely got the smile.

It was worth working for. It was a *great* smile.

âI brought corporate clothes,â she told him. âIâm not silly. But Iâve come from Australia. I came in a hurry because my aunt was dying, but I did pack decent clothes. Unfortunately the airline is playing keepings-off with them.â

âKeepings-off?â

âI put my clothes on the plane in Sydney. I put me on the plane in Sydney. I got off the plane here, but clearly my suitcase fell out somewhere around Hawaii. So now someone in Hawaiiâs wearing my good, Charles-facing suit while Iâm forced to wear the only clothes I have. I had one pair of decent shoes but I was stupid enough to use the same pavement as a New York mutt with poor choice in toilet placement. With ten minutes to make it here, Aunt Hattieâs sandals were all I had.â

âYou didnât think of buying something else?â he asked, and that was a mistake. Heâd shoved her down the stairs, heâd hurt her, and sheâd reacted with humour. Now, though, he got a blaze of anger that made him take a step back.

âYeah. Toss a little money at the problem and itâll go away. Of course. Whatâs money for? Just like Charles. You leave your mother with Peta until it looks like youâll inherit; then you haul her over to the other side of the world. Economy class. When sheâs dying! Even when you can afford all this! Only you donât really want her. You dump her in some appalling nursing home to die alone, making sure you get her to change her will firstâ¦â She bit her lip and the wash of pain across her face was dreadful.

âUmâ¦ I donât have a mother,â he said cautiously and the anger exploded even more.

âOf course you donât. I wasnât talking about you. I was just grouping you.â

âCategorising me?â

âYes.â

âI see.â He didnât. In fact, he didnât have a clue what was going on. Her anger was palpable and he needed to break through it in order to get someâ¦ Well, some order.

âWhoâs Peta?â he asked.

âMe.â She glowered.

âYouâre Peta? Hi. Iâm Marcus.â

She wasnât about to be distracted.

âI can do without the introductions. I havenât finished being angry yet.â

His eyebrows hiked. âIâm sorry. Butâ¦ Peta?â

âMy dad wanted a boy,â she snapped, recovering momentum. âAnd will you be quiet when Iâm letting off steam? You and Charles and Attila the Hun in there, you judge. You think just because Iâm not wearing an Armani suitâyeah, I can tell itâs Armani, Iâm not stupid, no matter how patronising you soundâthat I donât matter. Iâll never get to see Charles. Iâve used the last of my money to care for and bury Hattie, and if I donât get to see himâ¦â She gave a deep, raspy breath, the pain and the shock of the last few minutes finally surfacing to the point where they couldnât be hidden.

Sheâd been using her anger as a barrier, Marcus realised, and it wasnât working. Whatever was behind was breaking through.

âThis is stupid,â she whispered. âYou donât give a toss, and anyway, youâll have a secretary like Attila in there, and even if I threaten to sue the pants off you, youâll just turn to your secretary and say fix it. Keep her away from meâ¦â

âI wouldnâtâ¦â

But of course he would.

âMr Benson?â a voice said behind them and it was Ruby. His cool, unflappable assistant to whom he handed lifeâs problems. Lifeâs hiccups. The personal stuff. âIs there a problem, Mr Benson?â Ruby said smoothly. âHow can I help?â

Â

Ruby was wonderful. She was the answer to Marcus Bensonâs prayers.

Somewhere in her indeterminate post forties, a stout and sensibly dressed Afro-American, Ruby gave off the aura of someoneâs mother or someoneâs aunt. She was neither.

Nor did she have any secretarial qualifications. She had been an obscure, unnoticed clerk in Marcusâs vast financial empire when heâd found her almost by accident seven or eight years back. Marcus had been trying to juggle a Japanese delegation, a team of lawyers after his blood, and a posse of journalists and photographers from *Celebrity-Plus Magazine*. His highly qualified

secretary had wilted under pressure.

In desperation heâd gone to the outer office and called for anyoneâanyone!âwho could speak even a little Japanese.

To his astonishment Ruby had risen ponderously to her feet. Sheâd studied a little Japanese at night school, sheâd told him, and heâd expected nothing. But what heâd gotâ¦ In twenty minutes sheâd charmed the Japanese businessmen and organised an on-site lunch, sheâd diverted the reporters with vouchers to a nearby exclusive wine bar, and she was calmly taking notes while Marcus coped with the lawyers. And when he appeared flummoxed she even suggested priorities.

Her priorities were always right. Marcus had never looked for another assistant. Ruby didnât move fast. She was unflappable, and she was worth diamonds. More than diamonds. Now she assessed the situation at a glance, she figured what Marcus wanted and she proceeded to provide it.

âIf Mr Benson has hurt you, weâll do everything in our power to rectify it,â she told the girl. âMr Benson has an appointment right now which must be kept, but I can help.â She gave Marcus an enquiring lookâa look they both knewâwhich asked whether she should be sympathetic. She got a nod. A distinct nod and a smile. The combination of nod and smile was Marcusâs sign language for go all out to be nice.

And Marcus meant it. He was feeling really guilty here. If Ruby could make things better for this chit of a girl, then itâd be worth losing his precious assistant for half a day.

âIâll take you to the local medical facility and let someone see that ankle,â Ruby was saying as Marcus backed away a little. Letting her take charge. âWeâll replace your damaged clothes. Iâll buy you a decent meal and Iâll organise a cab to take you home. Is that okay?â

Marcusâs face cleared. It sounded good to him. Generosity would definitely help here. There was still the niggle of guilt, but Ruby would assuage it.

But it seemed they were not to be let off so easily. Or maybe they were being let off too easily.

âThank you.â Peta pushed herself into a sitting position. She glanced from Ruby to Marcus and back again. Her face had shuttered, showing no pain, no angerâ¦just nothing. It was a defence, Marcus realised. A shield.

âThank you but I donât need help,â she told Ruby, with another half glance at Marcus that said, Yeah, hadnât she been right all along? Here was his secretary ready to sweep his problems under the carpet. Petaâs look said she knew exactly the type Marcus wasâthe type who decreed when life got too difficult, pay someone.

Her look also said the sooner she was shot of him the better sheâd like it.

âIâm not going to sue, and my problems are not your problems,â she told them both. âI have an appointment to see Mr Higgins. Heâs running hours late as it is. If I leave now heâll say I missed my appointment and I canât afford to do that. So thank you, but Iâll stay here. Filthy or not. I canât afford to lose this chance.â

âMr Higgins wonât see you like that,â Ruby told her, blunt as ever, and Marcusâs face tightened.

âIâve already told her that. I doubt if heâll see her at all.â

Rubyâs lips pursed, acknowledging that he might be right. âBut if she has an appointmentâ¦â

âYou know Charles, Ruby. Heâs not about to let Peta anywhere near his corporate offices looking like this.â

âHey, excuse me,â Peta said cautiously, looking up at the two heads talking over her. âCan I join in this conversation?â

âOf course.â Marcusâs brows snapped together as Rubyâs eyes widened. The waif wasnât a victim, then.

âHe has to see me,â Peta was saying. âI have an appointment.â

âAn appointment with Charles means nothing if he figures thereâs the least chance you might not be able to pay,â Marcus told her. âAnd pay well.â

âHe has to see me,â she repeated. âHeâs my cousin.â

Silence while they took that on board.

âCharles Higgins is your cousin?â Ruby asked, and Peta nodded. She didnât look too pleased about it, though. In fact, she looked as if sheâd prefer the relationship didnât exist.

âHe is. Worse luck.â

âBut you have to make an appointment to see him?â Marcus didnât understand.

âYes.â

âYouâre running really late, Mr Benson,â Ruby said warningly, but Marcus had heard enough.

To say he disliked Charles Higgins would be an understatement. He detested the man. The word around town was that the man was utterly unscrupulous. He and his equally unscrupulous associates had rented office space here when Marcus had been in Europe; Marcus had been really annoyed that the man had been granted a twelve-month lease, and given the least excuse Higgins was out of here. He was trying to manoeuvre it now. But meanwhileâ¦ This girl would get nowhere with him. He knew that.

So did Ruby. He could read it in her face.

So, the best thing they could do for this girl was to clean her, feed her and give her a ride back to whatever cheap accommodation she was using.

Butâ¦

But.

Heâd hurt her. Heâd made her life difficult when it was already impossible. He could see that. There was real desperation in her eyes.

He knew enough of Charles Higgins to guess that the girl would be being screwed. He had no idea howâall he knew was that it was true. She was alone and bereft and heâd hurt her.

She expected him to throw his assistant at her and leave her to face the wolves alone.

Damn, he couldnât do it. He couldnât.

âRuby, can you reorganise my afternoon?â he said, and he said it as though every word was being dragged out of him. As if he couldnât believe what he was saying.

Not seeing this deal through this afternoon might well cost him thousands. But it couldnât be helped. When Marcus made a decision the decision was madeâand his decision was made right now.

âIf youâll set everything back a few hours, Iâll take Peta over,â he told Ruby. And then, as his assistantâs eyebrows hit her hairline, he clinched it.

âIâll face Charles Higgins with her.â

Â

âYouâ¦â

Marcus was left in no doubt of what she thought of him. She was still seated, with Marcus and Ruby speaking over the top of her. She was stillâwaif-like? Her mop of chestnut curls was tousled and wild, her freckled nose was completely free of make-up and that dollop of jelly was still there. And so was her antagonism towards him. Peta stared up at him and he thought ruefully that he might as well be Charles Higgins himself. Was it the suit? he wondered. Or the presence of his assistant? Tokens of powerâ¦ Whatever, there was no doubting that she was looking at him with contempt, as if such an action as he proposed was just a figment of his imagination.

âWhy not?â he demanded. He looked from Peta to Ruby and found their expressions matched. Both women were looking at him as if heâd lost his mind.

âThe project is important,â Ruby murmured, but he thought he detected a trace of a smile behind her normally expressionless eyes.

âI know. Iâm trusting you to keep things on ice until I can take over again.â

âAnd when will that be?â

âA couple of hours.â

âLetâs keep you clear until tomorrow,â Ruby suggested and there was no mistaking the laughter now. âYou might find ankle-fixing and clothes-shopping and lawyer-facing takes a bit longer than you think.â

âUmâ¦ Maybe you can do the ankle fixing and the shopping,â he said, suddenly uneasy. âThen I can take her in to see Charles.â

âNo!â Astonishingly, Ruby shook her head in definite disagreement. âNo, Mr Benson, I shouldnât do that. This is a fine gesture on your part and itâd be unfair of me to take over.â

âRubyâ¦â

âHey.â Still seated beneath them, Peta was catching her breath. Catching her dignity. Sort of. âThereâs no need for any of this. I told you. I donât need help.â

âIf you need to face Charles then you need help,â Marcus told her and Ruby nodded.

âTake his advice, miss,â she said gently. âYouâre Australian?â

âYes, butâ¦â

âIf I was in Australia, then Iâd take your advice on your territory,â she said. âBut this is corporate America. Thereâs no one more at home in this territory than Marcus Benson. You put yourself in his hands and youâre putting yourself in the hands of an expert.â

âI donât want to be in anyoneâs hands.â

âYou truly think you can get what you want without me?â Marcus demanded and she faltered.

âTo be honestâ¦â

âTo be honest, what?â

âTo be honest, I donât think I can get what I want anyway,â she admitted. âI was a fool to come. But I need to try.â

âSo if youâve come all this way,â Marcus said, his tone becoming gentler, âwhy not give yourself the best chance you could possibly have? Take my advice.â

âPut myself in your hands?â

âThatâs right.â

She stared up at him, bemused, and he gazed back down. Astonishingly, her eyes were bright and challenging. Her chin tilted upward, somehow defiant. She might look bereft but she certainly didnât act bereft. She had spirit, Marcus thought appreciatively. And courage.

It seemed she also had the sense to know when to concede. âOkay.â She swallowed. âOkay.â

Ruby beamed. Marcus Bensonâs assistant, it seemed, was enjoying this. Enjoying this a lot. âYou do exactly what Mr Benson says,â Ruby told her, and Peta gave her a rueful smile.

âIâm not much good at doing what anyone tells me.â

âThen be tactful,â Ruby told her and his assistant even had the temerity to chuckle. âMaybe itâll be good for both of you. Okay. Iâm off to save the worldâor your deal, Marcusâwhile you two front the awful Charles. I know which Iâd rather. Good luck.â

Â

âUmâ¦do you employ her?â Peta asked as Ruby disappeared down the fire-escape with an airy wave. Ruby had come to work this morning looking tired, but now she was practically bouncing down the fire-escape.

âI acquired Ruby,â he said, watching her disappear. âBy accident. Sort of like getting hit by a bus.â

âYou really like her.â Petaâs face had focused. All at once she seemed really interested. Her distrust backed off a pace.

âI donât do like,â he told her. âIâm a businessman.â

âSo if Ruby threatened to quitâ¦â

âIâd raise heaven and earth to keep her,â he admitted. âOf course I would. As I said, Iâm a businessman.â

Â

First the ankle. Which she intended to ignore.

âMy ankleâs just a bit bruised. Itâs no problem.â

âYour ankleâs puffing while we watch.â

âIâve done worse than this and lived without a doctor. Iâve come too far and timeâs too important to waste any in a doctorâs waiting room.â

âYou wonât have to wait. Put your hands around my neck and Iâll carry youâ¦â

âYou? Carry me? What, are you crazy? Iâll be sorry for myself with a strained ankle; youâll be a cripple for life.â

âI can carry you.â

âNo one carries me. Ever.â She hauled herself up against the stair rail and took two tentative hops.

It clearly hurt. A lot.

âPetaâ¦â

âNo.â

Enough. âYes,â he told her. And, although heâd never done such a thing in his life, he stepped forward and hoisted her into his arms.

She weighed nothing.

âDo you ever eat?â he demanded, stunned, and she gave an indignant wriggle.

âEat? Are you kidding? Of course I do. Except when corporate businessmen throw my lunch downstairs. Put me down.â

âNo.â Maybe she wasnât too thin, he decided, tightening his grip. Maybe there were curvesâjust where there should be curves. She smelled good. She feltâ¦good.

Inane. It was a stupid response but he couldnât help it.

âAre we catching the lift?â she demanded and he stared down

into her overbright eyes.

âNo. Weâll take the stairs.â

âYouâll drop me.â

âI wonât drop you.â

âIâll do more damage than a bagel if I hit anyone below.â

âI wonât drop you.â

âNo oneâs ever carried me before,â she said, and to his astonishment she stopped her indignant wriggle and suddenly relaxed. âGood grief.â Her green eyes twinkled. âOkay. Letâs do it. Maybe Iâll even like it.â

âMaybe.â

âAnd if you burst a blood vessel weâre going to an emergency department after all.â

âSo we are,â he said faintly and held her a little tighter. âSo we are.â

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She had him intrigued. Her reaction when she saw his car intrigued him as well. Robert, his chauffeur, was waiting at street level. He must have been pre-warned by Ruby. He didnât blink an eyelid when he saw his boss approach with his strange burden and by the time Marcus reached the car the back door was already open.

Peta, however, was less than ready to enter a black limousine with tinted windows.

âHoly cow. Iâm not getting in that thing.â

âYouâre sounding like a country hick,â Marcus told her and she glared at him.

âYeah, well, you soundâor lookâlike a mafia boss. I know which Iâd rather be. Chauffeurs. Limousines. Tinted windows, for heavenâs sake.â

âI need them tinted. I work in this car.â

âRight.â She hesitated, removing her arms from around his neck, and as she did he was aware of a sharp jab of loss. Sheâd put her arms around him for security but it had feltâ¦good. But she wasnât thinking about the sensations he was feeling. She was doing some forward projections. âNo one can see in. How do I know if I get in this car I wonât end up in concrete shoes?â

Enough. âRobert, help me put her in the carâwith force, if

necessary,â he told his bemused chauffeur. âAnd open the blasted windows! Mafiaâ¦ Good grief!â

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Then there was the medical clinicâa personalised service only available to New Yorkâs mega-rich. Peta was almost hornswoggled.

âYou just roll in here and someone sees you?â They were waiting for X-rays and the chairs they were sitting in were luxurious leather. Gorgeous!

âOf course.â

âThereâs no of course about it,â she snapped. âIf Iâd had this when Hattieâ¦â She took an angry breath. âCould Charles Higgins afford this sort of place?â

âIf the rent he pays is any indication, of course he can.â

âIâll kill him,â she muttered and sat back and glowered the entire time her leg was bandaged.

âYouâre lucky. Itâs not broken but itâs still badly bruised,â she was told by the attendant doctor. âStay off it. The nurses will fit you with crutches.â

Fine. Obviously still angry and with Marcus silent by her side, she hobbled her way to reception. And grew angrier still when Marcus paid.

âI can pay.â

âIâm very sure you canât,â Marcus told her gently. âIt was my fault. Let me.â

âMoney,â she whispered. âIt solves everything. As long as you can screw the world to get more of it.â

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Then there was the little matter of her clothes. With Peta safely resettled in his mafia car, Marcus directed Robert to Fifth Avenue.

âI just need a wash and Iâll be fine,â she told him, but he shook his head.

âNo. Charles is never going to admit you into his office looking like this.â

âButââ

âBut nothing. Itâs stupid going back there now to wait for a

reception youâre not going to get. Let me help.â

Let him help more. He couldnât believe he was doing this. Was he crazy?

He didnât get involvedâhe never got involvedâand for him to make this offerâ¦

She had no expectations of him, he thought. He could back away right now. Thereâd be no repercussions. Heâd never hear from this woman again.

But he couldnât. He stared down at the defiance in her face, and he saw the trace of desperation behind the defiance. There was no way he could walk.

He wanted to help. Come what may. For the very first time in many, many years, Marcus Benson wanted to be involved.

CHAPTER TWO

MARCUS thought he knew women. Marcus was wrong. And so was the shop where he took Peta.

One of the women heâd dated had told him once that the shop stocked fabulous business clothes but Peta hobbled in and looked around in suspicion. The shop assistants reacted the same way.

They smiled at Marcus. They were cautiously and patronisingly polite to the waif he had in tow.

Still, they were here for clothes. Not for pleasantries. Marcus didnât have time to mess around.

âCan you fit Peta out in something corporate?â he asked the assistant and Peta flashed him a look of annoyance.

âThat makes me sound like a Barbie doll. Letâs dress her in Corporate today.â

âDonât you want me to help you?â

âNo.â

âPetaâ¦â

âAll right.â As the assistant searched the racks for something suitable she flashed him a look that was half apology, but the defiance was still there. âI know. Youâre being really nice. Iâm being really stupid. But this feelsâ¦wrong.â

âItâs sensible. Just do it.â

âTry this,â the assistant said, with a bright smile at Marcus. Peta was ignored. She held the suit up against Peta, but it was Marcus who was clearly expected to make the decision.

He might have, but he never got the chance. As the girl smiled across at Marcus, Peta lifted the price tag.

She yelped.

Marcus doubted if heâd ever heard a woman yelp before but she yelped. She pushed the suit away and stared at him as if heâd lost his mind.

âWhat, are you crazy?â

âWhat do you mean?â

âLook at the price. I canât afford this.â

âIâm paying. I told you. I ruined your clothes.â

âYeah, you spilled my drink over my five-buck shirt and youâre intending to replace it with stuff that costs three thousand dollars?â She fended off the suit some more. âThree thousand dollars! Look, this seemed a really nice idea, and Iâm delighted to have a bandage on my ankle and these neat crutches, but suddenly itâs out of hand. Youâve done enough. I canât take any more. Can I leave? Now?â

She was backing towards the door.

âYou wonât get in to see Charles,â Marcus warned. He watched the conflicting emotions play over her face and felt the same conflict himself. Heâd been enjoying himself, he decided. It wasnât half badâmillionaire playing benefactor to very attractive waif. But the waif was supposed to be grateful. She was supposed to smile sweetly and acquiesce.

This was like Cinderella saying the glass slipper didnât fit. Or didnât look right.

She was still backing, no mean feat on brand-new crutches, and the conflicting emotions were giving way to overriding distress. âI just have to deal with Charles my own way,â she muttered.

âYou agreed to do this.â

âI was stupid. I must have hit my head on the way down the stairs. So now, somehow, Iâm standing in a swish store with a guy who has more money than Iâll ever dream aboutâand heâs offering to spend enough money on a suit to feed my family for a year.â

âYour family?â

Her face shuttered even more, and the pain intensified. âI donât need to talk about my family. Iâm out of my depth. I need to leave. Iâm sorry.â She backed a bit more until she was balancing in the doorway. âIâm sorry. Thank you very much for all youâve done.â

âPetaâ¦â

âI canât do this. I canât.â

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He caught her three doors down. Sheâd tried to move fast but she was on crutches.

Heâd followed. Of course heâd followed, even though he was unsure why he was still intent on helping. But he let her have a

little space until she cooled down.

She was forced to cool down. Her anger could only carry her so far before the pain in her ankle caught up with her. He watched her slow. He saw her steps falter as if she was unsure where to go from here.

He saw her shoulders slump. Saw the despair catch up.

And when he caught herâ¦ As he put a hand on her shoulder and turned her around to face him, he wasnât surprised to see tears welling behind those lovely eyes.

The tears stopped the moment he touched her. She swiped her cheek and pulled back. Swaying dangerously. He put out his hands to steady her but she backed some more.

âLeave me alone.â

âIâm sorry.â

âYou shouldnât be sorry. You were trying to be nice.â

He carefully pushed away the urge to play fairy godfather some more. He tried to put himself in her place. It was hard, but maybe he could manage it.

Once upon a time heâd been dependant, too, and he knew how much harder it was to take than give. It was justâ¦ In the last few years there had been so many takers.

Peta was a novelty. But he could adjust.

âI was a bit insensitive,â he managed. âI had this idea that I could help. And Iâd like to.â

âYou canât.â

âI can, you know,â he said softly. âIt would be my privilege. If you let me.â

âYeah, toss money.â Another angry swipe at tears she clearly despised and an angry sniff. âItâs all you know how to do.â

âIâm sorry.â He was stymied. He didnât have a clue what was happening. How had he got himself in this situation?

He could just stop. He had no reason to persist.

Why did he?

He had no idea what this woman wanted with Charles Higgins. He had no idea whether he could help her.

All he knew was that he wanted to know more.

âCan we start again, please?â he asked, and she sniffed once more and stared up at him, her face loaded with suspicion.

âStart again?â

âIâve driven into this like a blunderbuss,â he admitted. âI have no idea whatâs going on. I want to help. I donât even know why I want to help but I do.â He reached out and touched her hand. He didnât hold. He simply touched.

He knew that she still had the urge to run. He had it himself.

âTell me what you need,â he told her. âWhat can I do to help? Right now.â

She took a deep breath. Regrouped. Around them were a bustle of Fifth Avenue shoppersâsmartly dressed women, suited businessmen. Marcus fitted right in.

Peta didnât fit in at all. But she obviously wasnât thinking of her appearance. She stared at him for a while longer and then made a confessionâas if she was forced to admit something she was ashamed of.

âI need something to eat,â she told him.

âYouâre hungry?â

âI lost my bagelâremember? I didnât have breakfast and that was my lunch. And then I need a ticket on the subway to the backpackerâs where I have my things. I need to stay until tomorrowâfor Aunt Hattieâs funeral. But thatâs it. I was stupid to try to see Charles. I just wantâ¦ I think now that I just want to go home.â

âRight.â He nodded, aware all the time that she was poised for flight. âOkay. Iâll organise you transport. But let me feed you first. No.â He shook his head as she backed again and he gave a rueful smile. He knew what she was thinking. At long last he was getting the idea. Money didnât impress this woman. Money made her want to run. âThereâs a great deli nearby and itâs not expensive. Itâs simple food but itâs good. Concede at least that I owe you a meal. Can you cope with me for a little while longer?â

She stared up at him, seemingly bemused. She balanced on her crutches while she surveyed him. Her green eyes were suddenly thoughtful.

It wasnât the sort of look he was accustomed to receiving from the women he moved with. To say it disconcerted him was putting it mildly.

âYou must think Iâm really ungrateful,â she said at last, and it was so far from what he was really thinking that he blinked.

âI donât. Let me feed you.â

âLike something in a cage at the zoo?â

He smiled. âIâm sorry. That was badly phrased. Share a meal with me. Please.â

âOut of charity?â

âOut of my need to give you recompense.â

She stared at him for a long momentâand in that moment something shifted. The Cinderella image receded still further. There was a strength here, he realised. A latent force.

She was out of her depth. She wasnât sure what was happening to her right now, but this was a woman who would normally be in charge of her world.

Things were out of control but she was still fighting.

Heâd be lucky if sheâd agree to have a meal with him.

But she did, and he was aware of an absurd surge of gratitude as she did the thanking. âThank you,â she told him. âIâd like that.â

âSo would I.â And he meant it.

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The deli he took her to was one he hadnât eaten at for years, but still he knew it. The proprietor, a big man in his late sixties, greeted him with pleasure.

âWell. If it isnât the great Marcus come to patronise this humble establishmentâ¦â

âCut it out, Sam,â Marcus growled and Sam grinned.

âYeah, right. To what do we owe this honour?â He glanced at Peta and his wide smile was a welcome all by itself. âA lady. Of course. And a lady of taste. I can sense that already. I bet you could wrap yourself around one of my specials and not even think about counting calories.â

âI bet I could.â In the face of Samâs friendliness she seemed to finally relaxâjust a smidgeon. âTell me whatâs good.â

âWhatâs good? In this establishment everythingâs good. Tell you whatâ¦â He cast a sideways glance at Marcus and got an almost imperceptible nod for his pains. Samâs deli was famous in this city and his reputation was richly deserved. He sensed what people needed and he provided it. You came to Samâs for comfort food and friendliness and good humour. Sam provided it in bucketloads. âWhy donât I bring you my specials?â he told them. âMy lunch works. You sit back, think of nothing except what you need to talk about and let me worry about your meal.

Itâs what I do best.â

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Think of nothing except what they needed to talk aboutâ¦

It seemed there was nothing to talk about. Or Peta didnât seem to think there was. The food that Sam brought them was wonderful: a vast, steaming bowl of clam chowderâ Samâs speciality, handed down from his grandma, whoâd invented clams herself, he told themâand some sort of corn flapjacks that were truly spectacular.

It was good food. No. It was great food, Marcus conceded, and he found himself wondering why it had been so long since heâd been here. He sat back, enjoying the food but also enjoying the buzz. The place was full of students and young mothers and academics and artists who looked as if they didnât have a buck to their name. All of them were attacking their food the same way Peta was. This was food to be relished at every mouthful.

And while she ate, he found himself thinking of the date heâd been on last night. Elizabeth was a corporate lawyerâa good one. She was smart and sophisticated and beautiful. But sheâd toyed with her salad, sheâd drunk half a glass of wine and refused dessert.

Her beautiful waistline came at a cost, Marcus had thought, and though sheâd invited him up to her magnificent apartment afterwards for coffee, coffee was all theyâd had. Heâd felt no desire to take things further.

But nowâ¦sitting on the far side of the table and watching Peta devour her chowder and relish every mouthful of her flapjacks, he thought heâd rather have this contented silence than smart conversation. Genuine enjoyment.

âWhat?â she demanded suddenly, and he looked a question.

âI beg your pardon?â

âYouâre looking at me like Iâm an interesting kind of bug. I donât like it.â

âYouâre Australian,â he told her. âWhat do you expect?â

âYouâve never met an Australian?â

âNot one who likes clam chowder as much as you do.â

âItâs the best.â She smiled up at him and he blinked. Whew! That smile was enough to knock a man sideways.

Where had it come from? It was a killer smile. Wide and

white and there was a dimple right at the corner of her mouthâ¦

Yeah, right. Get a grip, Benson, he told himself. You need involvement here like a hole in the head.

He needed any involvement like a hole in the head.

âYou want to tell me why you need to see Charles Higgins?â he asked and her smile faded. He was aware of a sharp stab of regret. Damn, he shouldnât have mentioned it.

But it was why they were here. It was important. And, to tell the truth, he was intrigued.

This girl had just knocked back a gift of a three-thousand dollar suit. Just like that. Would any other woman he knew do that? It wasnât as if it had come with strings. It would have been a gift, pure and simple.

âYou might have knocked me down, but it was partly my fault,â she told him, and it was as if sheâd read his thoughts. âI donât want to be beholden. To anyone. You spend three thousand bucks on a suit for me and Iâll feel sick about it for the rest of my life. And Charles will know itâs a front.â

âCharles knows you?â

âI told you. Heâs my cousin.â

âThen whyâ¦?â

She could see where his thoughts were heading and she was way ahead of him.

âYou think because Iâm family I should have an entrÃ©e with him.â

âSomething like that.â

âIâm over here because my aunt died,â she told him. âCharlesâs mother. I spent the last few days sitting by Aunt Hattieâs bedside. I havenât seen Charles. Hattie is due to be buried tomorrow. Charles may or may not come to the funeral. Heâs certainly not paying for it.â

âSoâ¦â He took a wild guess. âYouâre not a close family?â

âIâm a very close family,â she told him, and took another mouthful of her flapjack. Difficult conversation or not, she wasnât forgetting that she was truly enjoying this food. But her voice, when she spoke again, held more than a trace of bitterness. âIâm so close Iâm practically glue,â she added. âGood old Peta. Sheâll do the right thing. The family thing. But not Charles.â

âSo why do you need to see him?â

She took a deep breath. She seemed to brace herself. Her fork was set down and her chin tilted in a gesture he was starting to recognise.

âAunt Hattie and my father owned half our family farm each,â she told him. âMy father left us his half when he died ten years back, and the agreement was always that Hattie would do the same. She hasnât. Sheâs left her half to Charles. So I need himâ¦â Her voice faltered then, as if accepting the sheer impossibility of what she was about to suggest. âI need him to agree not to sell it. To let me farm it untilâ¦until Iâm free.â

âFree?â

She looked up at him and her eyes were blind with a pain he couldnât begin to understand. âThe farm is all I have,â she told him. âIt canât mean anything to Charles. Itâs just money. He must see that to do anything but let me live there would be desperately unfair.â She bit her lip and then picked up her soda, trying desperately to move past a pain that seemed well nigh unbearable. âBut thatâs nothing to do with you. Charles is my cousin. My problem. Youâve given me a feed. Now Iâll clean myself as best I can, go back and try to face him one more timeâand if I canât Iâll go home. But at least Iâll have tried.â

He couldnât bear it. The look of pain. The defiance. David and Goliath, and Goliath was Charles Higginsâ¦ She had to let him take the next step with her. âYou canât face him alone,â he told her.

âOf course I can.â

âThereâs no of course about it,â he growled. âCharles is a slime-ball. Maybe heâs different with family but heâs still a slime-ball. Okay, I might be off the track with my offer of three-thousand-dollar suits but my instincts are right. Weâll get you something neat to wear and Iâm coming in with you. I might not get you more than an interview but I can get you that.â

âHow?â

âFor a start, I own the building he rents office space in.â

She stared. âYouâre kidding.â

âIâm not. Regrettably. Iâve already decided not to renew his lease when it expires but he doesnât know that. I can apply pressure.â

âButâ¦â

âFinish your soda,â he told her, aware at the back of his mind of his total amazement that he was doing this. That he was getting more and more involved. âWe mustnât keep Charles waiting now, must we?â

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They did the dress thing again, but this time Marcus had the sense to keep it simple. They headed to a moderately priced department store and Marcus stood back while Peta chose a neat skirt and blouse and strappy sandals. She looked great, Marcus decided, and then wondered: Why do women wear three-thousand-dollar suits when they can look just as good in far cheaper clothes?

But maybe that wasnât fair. Maybe Peta wasnât any woman. Sheâd look great in anything, he thought, as Robert drove them back to Higginsâs office.

The only problem was that she was a bit pale. Her hands were clenched so tightly that he could see the white in her knuckles. But she was still determinedly keeping up conversation as they made their way past Central Park.

âItâs Central Park I most wanted to see,â she told him. âEver since I was a little girl I dreamed of riding around Central Park.â

âYouâre a country girl?â

âI told youâwe live on a farm. I milk cows for a living.â

We? Who?

It didnât matter. Did it?

She was expecting a courteous, impersonal reply. He had to fight to find one. Somehow. âSoâ¦you live on a farm yet you dream of coming to New York to ride a horse?â

âItâs a different kind of riding.â She gave a hesitant smile and he saw that her hands were still clenched. He had to fight back the urge to lift themâto forcibly unclench them. âJohn Lennon loved this park,â she was saying. âJackie Kennedy loved this park. All these people that Iâve only read about.â

âYou admired Jackie O?â

âThe lady had class.â

âAnd John Lennon?â

âOooh, those glasses were sexy.â

âReally?â he said faintly and was rewarded by a chuckle. Her hands, he noticed with satisfaction, were finally starting to relax.

âSo who else do you think of as sexy?â he asked. âJust John? Paul? George? How about Ringo?â

âRingo was sexy,â she agreed. âReally sexy. When I see the old clips I think heâs cuteness personified. But now every time I hear him I think of Thomas the Tank Engine. Itâs a bit disconcerting.â

âI imagine it might be.â

She was so different. How had his day been hijacked? he wondered. How had this happened? Instead of making plans and signing million-dollar deals, he was discussing the sexiness of Thomas the Tank Engine.

And enjoying it.

But then they were pulling up outside the offices where Charles presumably lay waiting, and her hands clenched white again.

âDonât sweat it,â Marcus told her and he surprised himself by placing a hand over her much smaller one. The touch surprised them both. It was as if a *frisson* of electricity ran between them, warm, intimate and somehow immeasurably comforting. âIâm right behind you,â he heard himself saying. âEvery step of the way.â

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Miss Pritchardâalias Attila the Hun, Charlesâs secretaryâwas her normal appalling self. Peta stepped out of the lift and she saw her coming and sighed. She didnât even pretend to be courteous.

âWhat do you want?â

âIâm here for my appointment,â Peta said, trying to keep her voice steady. âIt was for ten this morning.â

âMr Higgins had a moment free at two,â the woman said, her disdain obvious in her intonation. âBut you werenât here. He has no more appointments available until late next week.â

âThen could you ask Mr Higgins if heâll make an appointment free for me,â Marcus said, his lazy drawl making the womanâs face jerk from Peta to the man following behind. The man who, until now, had stood in the background and had not been noticed. Marcus. âI believe the lease for this office space is soon up for renegotiation,â Marcus drawled. âAs landlord I expect a certain professional standard of my tenants.

Peta had an appointment at ten this morning and sheâs still waiting. To have disgruntled clients hanging around my office space is not what I wish in my buildings.â

He motioned to a chair. âPeta, if youâd like to sit downâ¦â He gave the secretary a glimmer of a mockery of his smileâthe sort of smile that had made many a business opponent come close to bursting a blood vessel in entirely appropriate anxiety. âWeâll wait,â he told the woman. âTell Mr Higgins that weâre here and weâll wait for as long as it takes.â

Attilaâs eyes had been flat and cold before. Now, suddenly, they looked like those of a goldfish. A goldfish that was swimming over an unplugged hole. There were very few people in this city who werenât aware of Marcusâs power. It was legendary. âButâ¦â

âJust tell him,â Marcus said wearily. âIâd like to get this over quickly. I hope Mr Higgins feels the same.â

It appeared Mr Higgins did. Five minutes later they were ushered apologetically into the great manâs presence.

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To say Peta was tense was an understatement. This interview was overwhelmingly important to her, Marcus thought. The look on her face as she walked into Charlesâs office said she intended to be calm, practical and efficient.

She obviously hadnât counted on the store of anger that must have been walled up for so long that the moment she saw her cousin it could do nothing but burst.

Charles was seated behind a vast mahogany desk. Before he could stand, Peta had stalked across and slammed her hands palm downward on the gleaming surface, so hard she made the in-tray jump.

âYou uncaring toad,â she spat, and Marcus blinked in astonishment. But Peta was obviously past caring.

âYou brought Hattie over here and she came because she thought you loved her. She hoped you loved her. But you didnât. You abandoned her.â Petaâs voice was loaded with contempt and with icy rage. âShe could have died at home. With me. With Harry. With people who loved her. But you told her you wanted her here. You conned her into coming where she knew no one. How could you?â

âMy relationship with my mother has nothing to do with you,â Charles snapped. The man was in his late thirties, florid, wearing a three-piece suit that was as sleazy as it was expensive, and he was obviously deeply disdainful of the woman before him. âI have no idea what you want from me, Peta, or why youâve bothered with this appointment.â He cast an uneasy glance at Marcus and then looked back at Peta. It was apparent that Marcus was the only reason heâd agreed to see herâthe only reason he didnât get up now and push her out the door. âOr how youâve dragged Mr Benson into this.â

âNo one drags me anywhere,â Marcus said softly. He hauled up a chair and sat, with the air of a man who was here for the entertainment.

âThis is family business,â Charles told him, and Marcus gave him his very nicest smile.

âConsider me Petaâs family. Iâve just elected myself. Peta, I hate to mention it but I donât think haranguing Charles on his mistreatment of his motherâjustified as it may beâis going to achieve a lot. Letâs just cut to the chase and get out of here. This place makes me nervous.â

Charles flushed. âYou donât have to stay.â

âIâm with the lady. Peta, say what you need to.â

Peta bit her lip. She half turned towards him and Marcus was waiting for her. He met her look and he sent her a silent message.

Settle. Angerâs not going to achieve anything. Whatâs important?

Peta caught it. She fought for control, taking a deep breath. Moving forward.

âThe willâ¦â she began.

âAh, yes.â Charles had had time to do a regroup, too. âThe will.â With another nervous glance at Marcus, Charles settled deeper into his leather chair. His huge desk was guaranteed to intimidate the most influential of clients, and he clearly had no intention of moving from behind its protective distance. âWhat on earth do you have to say about my motherâs will?â

âHattie meant to leave her half of the farm to me.â

âNot so, cousin.â Charles even smirked.

Why do I want to hit him? Marcus thought, and he had to

force himself to stay still. To stay an uninvolved bystander.

âHattie lived at the farm for all her life,â Peta was saying. âWe all have. Everyone except you. You left twenty years ago. But the farm paid for your education. For your travel.â She gazed around the opulent office. âI bet it subsidised this. Your costs have already bled us dry. Youâve taken half our profits for ever. Itâs crazy that she left her half of the farm to you.â

âIâm her son.â

âBut weâve subsidised you with so much already and she knew I canât afford to buy you out. That itâd force me to sell.â

âThatâs not my problem.â

âNo.â She took a deep breath, obviously forcing herself to stay calm. âNo, itâs not. And it shouldnât be. All Iâm askingâ¦ All Iâm asking is that youâll hold on to your half of the farmâlet me keep farming itâuntil Harryâs of age.â

âHarry beingâ¦â He almost sneered but then appeared to remember that Marcus was watching and turned it somehow into a vaguely supercilious smile. âHarry being how old?â

âTwelve.â

Twelve. In the background Marcus frowned, absorbing the information. It didnât fitâdid it? Surely Peta wasnât old enough to have a twelve-year-old son?

Maybe he should have asked more questions.

âWe need to stay on the farm until Harryâs eighteen,â Peta was saying, almost pleading. âCharles, you know how important the farm is to us all.â

âIt was never important to me.â

âIt paid for your education. It let you be what you wanted and I want Harry to have that choice, too. And itâs a really good investment,â she told him. âIâm more than happy for you to keep taking half the profits, and the land is growing more valuable all the time.â

âIâve checked,â he told her. âItâd sell for a fortune now. Because itâs near the sea it can be cut up into hobby farm allotments. You own half. We both stand to make a killing.â

âWe love the farm.â

âGet over it. Iâm selling.â

âCharlesââ

âLook, if thatâs all you have to sayâ¦â He eyed Marcus with disquiet, obviously still wondering how on earth Marcus came to

be involved. âYouâre wasting my time.â

Peta swallowed. Her hands clenched and unclenched. But, looking on, Marcus saw the moment she realised the futility of pleading. He saw her shoulders sag.

He saw her accept defeat.

And it hurt. It hurt him as well as the girl he was watching. Why did he want to hit someone? Not just someone. Charles. The urge was almost overwhelming.

But Peta had moved on. To the next important thing. âWill you come to Hattieâs funeral tomorrow?â she whispered.

âFunerals arenât my scene.â

âHattie was your mother.â

âYeah.â Another sneer. âAnd sheâs dead. Iâm over it, just like you should be. And, as soon as the funeralâs over, the farmâs on the market. Itâd be on the market today if it wasnât for that clause.â

âClause?â Marcus queried.

This was the sort of negotiation he was good at. Heâd learned from long practice that it was better not to jump in earlyâto simply sit back, listen and absorb. Focus on essentials. And probe everything.

Charles flashed him an annoyed glance. âMy mother put a stupid codicil in her will. I left before the lawyer finished, and she did itâ¦â

âTell me about it,â Marcus said gently and Charles glowered.

âItâs none of your business.â

âTell me about it.â

âIf Iâm married then I inherit,â Peta said, obviously distressed. âIt makes no sense. Just before Hattie left to come here, I went out with one of the local farmers. Twice. It was enough to make Hattie think about me getting married. As if I could. But she thoughtâ¦ Well, she worried about me, my Auntie Hattie. She thought Iâd spend my life caring for the family and not myself. So she must have thought sheâd push. By putting in a stupid clause at the end. If Iâm married then Iâll inherit. But itâs not an option.â

âWhatânever?â

âIn a week?â She gave a bitter laugh. âHattieâ¦ Well, she was terminally ill. She was a bit muddled, even before she left

Australia. That was probably how Charles persuaded her to come. Sheâd have worried about me, but she was here in New York, alone, and Charles would have pushed her hard to leave him the farm. So she wrote a will leaving everything to Charles, but apparently, after Charles left her alone with the lawyer, she added a codicil. The codicil says if Iâm married within a week of her dying then the farm reverts to me. Butâ¦ A week? Maybe she meant a year. Maybeâ¦ Well, who knows what she meant, but she said a week. Thatâs by Wednesday.â She turned to her cousin again, her eyes dulled with the knowledge of what he would say. She already knew.

âCharles, please.â

âJust leave. Youâre wasting my time.â Charles rose, smoothed his already too smooth waistcoat and walked around to the door. He was really overweight, Marcus noticed. Short. Pompous. A slime-ball. It was as much as he could do not to flinch as the little man stalked past him to open the door.

âIâm sorry sheâs wasted your time, Mr Benson,â Charles told him. âIâm sorry sheâs wasted mine. Go back to the farm, Peta, where you belong. Enjoy it for the last few weeks before itâs sold. But get used to it. Itâs on the market the moment the week is up.â

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âIâm sorry I wasted your time.â

Theyâd been silent as they rode the lift to ground level. They emerged on to the street to brilliant sunshine and Peta blinked as if she couldnât believe sun could exist in a place such as this.

âI assume the farm is worth a lot,â Marcus said mildly, and she blinked again.

âWhat? Oh, yes. You heard what he said. It is.â

âSo youâll be well off?â

âSplitâ¦no. I wonât be well off.â

âDo you have any professional training?â

âSorry?â

âDo you have a career?â

âYes. Iâm a farmer.â

A farmer. He might have known. Of course. âCan you get a job somewhere? Farming?â

âAre you kidding? With four kids? Whoâs going to take me on?â

âFour kids?â he said cautiously, and she shrugged as if it was none of his business. As indeed it wasnât.

Or it shouldnât be.

âLook, I said Iâm sorry.â She took a deep breath. âOkay. Enough. Youâve been really nice to me. Much nicer than I possibly could have hoped for. Iâve come over here and Iâve been with Hattie while she died. Thanks to you, Iâve seen Charles and Iâve asked him what I had to ask. I knew it was hopeless but I had to try. For the boys. Now Iâm planning to bury my Auntie Hattie with all the love that I can, and then Iâll get on an aeroplane and return to Australia. Thereâs an end to it.â

âYou have four kids?â He was stuck in a groove, he thought, but had to know. How old was she? Twenty-five? Twenty-six?

Four kids.

His eyes moved involuntarily to her waistline and he thought, no. No way.

She saw his gaze shift. âWhat are you staring at?â

âYour figure,â he admitted with a rueful smile. âYouâve held up pretty well for four kids.â

Her eyes widened. She looked stunned. And then her face, which had looked strained to the point of breaking, suddenly creased into laughter. A gorgeous chuckle rang out, making others on the pavement turn and stare.

She had the loveliest smile. The loveliest laugh.

âYouâre thinking Iâm a single mum with four kids?â

âWellâ¦â

âTheyâre my brothers,â she told him. âDaniel, Christopher, William and Harry. Twenty, eighteen, fifteen and twelve in that order. All students. The farm supports them all.â She caught herself. âOr, I guess, I support them all. They help. Theyâre great kids but itâs mostly over to me. Until now. Now I guess the capital will pay for their education but heaven knows where weâll live. The university vacations are four months long. Thatâs when weâre a family. And Harry loves the farm so much. Itâll break his heart if we have to leave.â

Silence. Marcus stared at her in disbelief.

Four brothers? She was supporting four brothers?

Good grief! So great a load on such slim shoulders. He winced and she managed a smile. Her laughter had gone again. The burden was back in place.

âIâve said it before. Itâs my problem. Not yours.â

âYou could always marry.â His voice was still faint with shock and she gave a rueful smile.

âBy Wednesday? I donât think so. It was a crazy codicil made by a confused old woman who would have been desperate to make things right for everyone. Which was always going to be impossible.â She took his hand in hers and shookâa warm, firm handshake that was a shake of dismissal. âThank you very much for helping me, Mr Benson. Youâve done more than enough and Iâm really grateful. Goodbye.â

And that was that. She turned and manoeuvred her crutches away from him, limping down the pavement, which was crowded with late afternoon shoppers.

She stood out, he thought, and it wasnât just her crutches. In truth, it wasnât her crutches at all. It was her flame hair. Her figure. The lovely curve of her slender neck. And her strength. The way she braced her shoulders, as if expecting to be struck.

It was so like David and Goliath, he thought again, but she had no slingshot. She had no weapon of any kind.

He stood and watched her go. Heâd been dismissed. She was asking nothing of him.

She was on her own.

He couldnât bear it. He didnât have a clue what he was doingâwhat he was sayingâbut he knew only that he had to do it.

âPeta, stop,â he called, and she paused and half turned towards him.

âYes?â She had the air of someone whoâd already moved on. She looked slight and pale and somehow almost ethereal. As if any moment sheâd vanish.

She could, he realised. He had this one moment to prevent it or sheâd be gone and he need never see her again.

Which was what he wantedâwasnât it? He didnât get involved. He never got involved. Heâd made a vow a long time ago and heâd never been tempted to break that vow.

Until now. Until the choice was to break the vow or to watch Peta take the next few steps and take her burden back to

Australia.

He didnât even know what her burden was. He hardly knew her. He had a corporate deal to stitch up; he had a date tonight with a woman most men would kill to be seen with; he had a life in New Yorkâ¦

Peta was watching him, her pixie face questioning. Waiting. Waiting for release so she could disappear.

He couldnât give her that release. And there was only one way to stop her disappearing.

âThere is a way you can be married by Wednesday,â he called, and the shoppers around them paused in astonishment.

Peta paused in astonishment.

âHow?â she called, but maybe she hadnât called it. Maybe her voice was a whisper. They were twenty yards apart and there were people between. He saw her lips move. He saw the thought in her eyes that he was holding her up for nothing.

But he wasnât. He knew what he had to say and when he said it, it sounded right. Even inevitable.

âYou can marry me.â

CHAPTER THREE

SHE couldnât believe what sheâd heard. One minute she was looking defeat and despair in the face. This was the end of the world as she knew it. Tomorrow sheâd have to bury Aunt Hattie with all the love and honour she deserved, trying to block out the hurt caused by this appalling last will. Then sheâd climb on to an aeroplane and go home to face the boys and tell them that she didnât have a clue what their future held.

As opposed toâ¦what?

As opposed to facing the man twenty yards away from her and trying to make sense of his crazy statement.

âI beg your pardon?â she said at last and there was general laughter among the passers-by. Marcusâs words hadnât just shocked Peta. More than one person had stilled to listenâto hear her response to this fascinating question.

âHeâs asking you to marry him, love,â an elderly woman told her. âHe looks a good sort of catch. Iâd think about it if I were you.â

âSheâs young,â someone else proffered. âPlus sheâs pretty. Sheâs got plenty of time to play the field.â

âNo, but look at that suit,â the older woman retorted. âThe guyâs obviously loaded. You do it, love, but donât go signing one of them pre-nup agreements. You take him for all heâs worth.â

âPretty funny proposal, if you ask me,â someone else said. âYou think sheâs got leprosy or something, that he has to stay two shops away from her to ask her to marry him?â

âYour girl got leprosy?â someone else demanded. âIs that why the crutches?â

Even Marcus smiled at that.

So did Peta. Itâs a joke, she thought. Itâs a joke in appalling taste, but itâs a joke for all that.

âThanks,â she called, with what she hoped was a vestige of dignity. âItâs a very nice proposal but I have a funeral to go to, and then a trip home to Australia. I canât fit you in.â

âIâm serious, Peta.â

She flinched. Stop it, she thought. Sheâd been through enough. It was time for the sick jokes to subside. It was time for everything to subside. For now, all she wanted to do was to crawl away into a dark cupboard somewhere and mourn her aunt as she deserved.

But Marcus was striding towards her through the throng of entranced passers-by. She felt an almost overwhelming urge to turn and runâfastâbut of course she couldnât. Her ankle wouldnât let her. She had to stand and be polite. It was the only thing she could think of to do.

But she wanted to run.

Or did she?

âMarcusâ¦â

âIâm serious.â He reached her and his hands came out and caught hers. They were much bigger than her handsâmuch stronger. She could feel their strength and she could feel the urgency behind the strength.

Sheâd been holding her crutches. As he caught her hands, the crutches fell awayâwhich made her feel even more helpless than ever.

âPeta, we can do this.â

âWhatâ¦what?â She could scarcely muster a whisper.

âWe can marry. As you turned away just now I saw it. Your auntâs will has an out. You need to marry before Wednesday and you can. You can marry me.â

âButâ¦you donât want to marry me.â

âOf course I donât. I donât want to marry anyone. But thatâs just it. Because I donât want to marry anyone then I can marry you.â

âThatâs stupid.â

âNo. Itâs sensible.â

âWhy is it sensible? How can it be sensible?â She didnât know whether to laugh or to cry. Or simply to run. This big man with the smiling eyes was looking down at her with an expression that said he had all the answers to her problems right here. She just had to trust him.

Trust him? She didnât know him. She pulled on her hands but his hold tightened.

âPeta, it can work.â

âHow can it work? How can it possibly work?â

Â

But fifteen minutes later, when heâd calmed her down sufficiently to listen, she was starting to concede that it just might.

âIâll have my lawyers sift the will this afternoon,â Marcus told her. âBut if thatâs all you needâto be marriedâthen Iâm happy to oblige.â

She sat across the table from him. Theyâd found the first coffee shop they could; theyâd sank into two deep armchairs and they hadnât moved. Peta felt as if sheâd been hit by a sledgehammer.

âButâ¦you only spilled my lunch,â she managed. She felt as if all the wind had been sucked out of her. âYou hardly ravished me. You hardly destroyed my honour or my marriage prospects. And here you are offering to marry me. Why?â

âI donât like Charles Higgins.â

âThen kick him out of your building. Put salt in his water cooler. Cut off his supplies of waistcoats. Whatever. But not this. Youâre offering to get involved up to your neck.â

But he was shaking his head, smiling. âNo, Iâm not. Iâm simply offering to get married. Thatâs all. A simple ceremony. We do the deed. Despite what the lady on the street says, we draw up a pre-nuptial agreement saying we have no recourse to each otherâs property after divorce, and then we go our separate ways. After your estate has been settled, weâll divorce. My lawyers can take care of that. Apart from the one simple ceremony, we need never have anything to do with each other.â

âButâI still donât understand.â She looked up from the mug of coffee she was cradling and met his look head-on. His smile just deepened her sense of confusion. âOkay, you donât like Charles Higgins,â she said. âThatâs not a reason for doing this. Not for you. Itâd solve my problems, and thatâs so important to me that Iâm almost tempted to fall in with your crazy plan. But there has to be a catch. There must be. What do you want in return?â

He hesitated.

She watched his face. It was a good face, she thought, somehow forcing herself to be dispassionate. It held strength and

warmth and humour. A girl could do a lot worse than marry a man like this. Especially as the marriage would last a whole five minutes.

But it was crazy. It was!

It seemed, though, that it hadnât been a spur-of-the-moment offer. He was really thinking.

âItâd be something good to do,â he said at last. âI donât know whether you can understand that, but itâs important to me.â

âNo. I donât understand. Explain it to me.â

âIâd like to help.â

âBy playing King Cophetua to my beggar maid?â She flushed and stared down into her coffee dregs. âIâm sorry. That was ungracious of me.â

âBut itâs how my proposition makes you feel?â

Her chin jerked up at that and she met his gaze, startled. âYes. It does. You understand.â

âThat itâs a lot harder to take than to give? Yes. I know that.â

âAnd I know nothing about you.â

âPeta, I come from a background where there was nothing to do but take,â he told her. His eyes held hers, steady and strong. Telling her he was speaking a truth that was important to him. âWe had no choice. My mother was a welfare recipient and I had to fight anyone and everyone to get where I wasâand accept help from all sorts of people Iâd rather not be indebted to. Soâ¦ Iâve spent a lifetime getting to the other side of that divide and now Iâm in a position to give. It doesnât mean, though, that Iâll expect gratitude or undying devotion. Just a simple thank you and then weâll get on with our lives. And one day when youâre on the other side of the divide you might be able to do the same for someone else.â

âLikeâ¦take a good deed and pass it on?â

âSomething like that, yes.â

âItâs some good deed!â She was sounding a bit hysterical, she decided, but then she thought, why shouldnât she sound hysterical? Maybe she was hysterical.

âPetaâ¦â

âMmm?â

âLetâs just marry and move on.â

âHow on earth can I marry you?â

âEasy. We get ourselves a licence and we marry. There are formalities we need to go through but Iâd imagine if I throw a bit of money and power at those formalities theyâll disappear. I donât have the best legal team in New York for nothing. You said we have until Wednesday.â

âYes, butâ¦â

âThatâs the day after tomorrow. No sweat. We can do the thing easily.â

âYou sound like you do it once a week.â

âI havenât. Iâve never married.â

âAnd if you meet the bride of your dreams next week?â

âThat wonât happen.â

âWhy ever not? Are you gay?â

That stopped him in his tracks. He very nearly dropped his coffee and, when he recovered, his mouth quirked upward in a grin.

âNo, Peta, Iâm not gay.â

âYou neednât sound so patronising,â she told him crossly. âI canât tell. You hardly wear a sign or something. What other reason can you have for not marrying?â

He hesitated. Considering. He was about to indulge in confidences, Peta thought, and she also thought: thatâs something this man seldom does. What was it about him that made her know that he kept himself to himself? Entirely.

But he was breaking his rules now and his voice, when he spoke, had a reluctance that told her he didnât have a clue why he was doing it.

âMy mother married four times,â he told her. âFour times! And for every ceremony she was your traditional bride. She dressed me up as a pageboy, she glowed with excitement and she told me itâd be a happy-ever-after ending. But she chose losers. Every wedding threw us deeper into trouble. So I stood at the last of those ceremonies and I told myself it would never happen to me. Iâd never take those vows. Some things are ingrained, Peta. Iâm not about to change my mind now.â

She thought about that but it didnât make sense. âSo your mother wasnât very good at getting married,â she said gently. âIâm sorry. But thereâs still a whole bunch of people in the world who think marriage is a very good idea.â

âThere were other things. Getting attachedâ¦ I learned early

that independence is better.â

âEasier?â

âProbably easier,â he admitted, and she stared into his face and saw he really meant what he said.

Maybe it was the truth. Independence had a lot going for it. Sheâd heard. Sheâd never, ever had it.

But now wasnât the time to be thinking regretfully about an independence sheâd never had and was hardly likely to have. Now she had a man sitting in front of her offering her a possible way out of the difficulties that were threatening to overwhelm her.

She didnât know anything about this man. His offer was ludicrous.

Marry him?

He was watching, waiting for an answer. Where on earth was an answer when you needed one?

âI donât even know you.â

âYou donât need to know me.â

âYou might be a con artist.â

âYeah. About to scam you out of half your farm. That gives you a choice. It seems that you either trust me and risk losing half your farm or you definitely lose half your farm to Charles.â

âYou canât be serious?â

âI am serious.â

âButâ¦ I canât.â

âWhy not? Is there anyone else that you want to marry?â

She thought about that for a whole two seconds. The concept was crazy. âNo, butââ

âBut there you are. Take it or leave it. Iâm offering. Iâm not really sure why Iâm offering but it seems sensible. Will you marry me, Peta? For better or worse. Until distance does us part? Until at least Friday?â

She looked blankly at himâstunned.

âYou really are serious.â

âI really am serious.â

Her mind was going in a thousand different directions. A million. But overriding allâ¦ Overriding all was the thought that maybe somehow she could keep the farm.

Her head was spinning. Her ankle was throbbing. She felt so

near the edge that any minute now sheâd topple over. To make such a momentous decisionâ¦

âPeta.â His hand gripped hers and held, hard. âPeta, you donât need to understand. You canât, because I hardly understand myself. All you have to do is trust. Just say yes.â

Just say yesâ¦

Easy to say. Will you marry me?

Maybe it wasnât momentous at all, she thought wildly. People were divorced every day. What was the marriage? A simple document that could be annulled at any time. And the boys would be safe.

She bit her lip. She stared into Marcusâs calm grey eyes and he stared back. Still Marcus held her hand. Still Marcus watched her, waiting.

And in the end it was easy. There was nothing else to say.

âOkay,â she whispered. âOkay, Marcus. Thank you very much. I have no idea why youâre wanting to do this but Iâm very grateful. So yes, Iâll marry you. As soon as possible.â

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Marcus Benson, in organisational mode, was a man to be reckoned with. Peta was put into Robertâs care and taken back to her hotel with instructions to rest her ankle. Marcus moved on to the wedding.

Heâd told Peta he could organise this by Wednesday. In truth it was a guess. He had no idea if it was possible.

A man with no idea turned naturally to his assistant. In crisis, find Ruby. Fast.

Ruby was summoned peremptorily from the boardroom where sheâd been putting things on hold because of Marcusâs absence. The unflappable Ruby was already feeling under pressure. By the time she reached his office she was almost ruffled, and when Marcus told her he wanted her to organise his wedding she was surprised into the unthinkable response of choking.

It took a glass of water before she could make herself understood.

âYou? Married?â

âWhatâs wrong with me getting married?â

She thought about it. Marcus was behind his desk. He

watched her with patience, seeing her eyes grow round in response to this extraordinary request. Seeing her think it through.

âTo the waif?â she asked cautiously and he nodded.

âTo Peta. Thatâs right.â

And Rubyâwho had never in Marcusâs lifetime been known to show surprise at anythingâproceeded to drop her jaw almost to her ankles.

âI donât believe it.â

âIt doesnât matter whether you believe it or not,â he told her, annoyed. âJust tell me what I need to do it.â

She thought some more. She sipped water and took a visible grip. âUmâ¦ Weddings. Iâve never done weddings. Butâ¦ Okay. I can do this.â A bit more thinking. Then, âDo you have any preferences?â

âPreferences?â

âLike church, civil, white, rose petals, bridesmaidsâ¦â

âNo preferences. Just a fast wedding.â

âHow fast?â

âTomorrow.â

âTomorrow!â Rubyâs voice came out practically a squeak. She regroupedâsort of. âUh, did you say tomorrow?â

âThatâs right. Wednesday at the latest.â

âThere are things like licences. Iâm sure there are. Formalities. Queues.â

âThrow as much money as you need at the problem. Just fix it.â

âGee, how romantic.â

âRuby,â he said warningly and her eyebrows hiked.

âYes, sir?â

âJust fix it.â

âCertainly, Mr Benson. Very good, Mr Benson.â She took a deep breath and he could see she was fighting laughter. âDo we know the brideâs name?â

âPeta.â

The eyebrows hiked again. âI know her first nameâs Peta,â she said with exaggerated patience. âWeâre going to need a bit more information. Just a bit.â

âRight.â He handed a sheet of paper across the desk. âI had her write down her details. Iâm not stupid.â

âSo.â Ruby looked down at the sheet. âPeta OâShannassy. Aged twenty-six. Australian.â

âThatâs right.â He hadnât known. He frowned suddenly. Hell, what was he getting himself into? Peta OâShannassy. Sheâd written down her name but this was the first time heâd heard it.

âShe needs me to do this,â he told Ruby, and she paused from reading the sheet and looked at him. Really looked at him.

âSheâs in trouble?â

âYes.â

âYou want to tell me?â

He sighed. But Ruby on side was a force to be reckoned with and heâd learned a long time ago it was better just to give in and tell. Briefly he outlined what was happening and, when he had finished, her face had changed. The laughter had gone. The determination he felt was strangely mirrored in his assistantâs eyes.

Ruby had met Peta. She knew Charles. Marcusâs dislike wasnât purely personal.

But Ruby was moving on again, on to business. Her speciality. âYouâll need a decent pre-nuptial agreement. One that will hold water.â

âCan you get that underway?â

âSure.â She hesitated. âYou know, Charles wonât take this lying down. Not if thereâs money involved.â

âI suppose he wonât.â

âLet me run this past our lawyers,â she told him. âIâll organise a copy of the will to be faxed here this afternoon. You donât want to go into this blind. Orâ¦â She paused and a glimmer of laughter appeared again behind her eyes. âOr any more blind than you appear to be.â

âRight.â

Then she hesitated. âMarcusâ¦â

âYes.â

âYou knowâ¦ Peta has her contact address here.â

âI told her to put it down in case you need her to fill in forms.â

âMmm.â She looked again at the piece of paper and cast a cautious glance at him. âDo you know where sheâs staying?â

âIt doesnât matter. This wedding is a formality. Where she lives is her business.â

âRight.â There was another thoughtful glance. âItâs justâ¦ I know this hotel. A neighbour had a friend from Canada who stayed there one night. Itâs the cheapest place in town. But he came out of it robbed blind.â

Silence.

It was entirely Petaâs business where she stayed, he told himself.

But of course it was no such thing. Marcus took the written sheet from Ruby and stared down at the address. Hisâ¦his bride?

âCan you fix it?â he asked Ruby.

âWhatâturn up there and tell her Marcus says move?â

âI guess not.â Heâd seen enough of Peta to figure that wasnât the best way to go about things. Butâ¦ He didnât get involved. He didnât!

He was involved. He was involved up to his neck. âI need to go,â he said finally, and Ruby nodded.

âOf course you do,â she agreed. âMarcus Benson to the rescue. Good grief!â

But Marcus was no longer listening.

Marcus had already gone.

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By the time Robert dropped her at the door of her hotel Peta was past exhaustion. She lay back on the hard mattress and tried for sleep. Sheâd hardly slept since sheâd arrived in this country. The doctors had given her pain-killers and warned her theyâd make her sleep. She should be out for the count.

But sleep was nowhere.

It wasnât the noise that prevented her from sleeping. Sheâd stayed in this place for over a week and sheâd learned to turn off from the drunken cacophony that surrounded her.

Nor was she disturbed about her own security. There was something distinctly comforting about having nothing left to steal. Her passport and her airline ticket were in a money-belt next to her skin and there was nothing else.

The throb in her ankle had even eased.

She should sleep.

But how could she? Marcus was with her. Every time she

closed her eyes he was right there, filling her head, his gentle eyes probingâ¦

He was marrying her?

The thought was unbelievable. The concept was unbelievable. Marcus Benson was marrying Peta OâShannassy.

Who was Marcus Benson? She didnât know. But what could she do about it?

The sensible thing would be to hire a private detective and find out at least a little of the man she intended to marry. She didnât have enough funds to consider it.

Butâ¦ Her hand rested on her money belt and the same comforting thought arose.

She had nothing worth stealing. He could hardly cheat her. What did she have? Half a farm, split five ways. She had so many encumbrances she felt weighed down with concrete.

If Marcus was marrying her for anything other than altruism then he had a big surprise coming, she decided.

He could have Harry.

The thought came out of left field and, surprisingly, it was good. Marcus would like Harry. Harry might even like Marcus. Harry was the smallest of her responsibilities but sometimes he felt the heaviest.

Yep. She might love Harry to bits but if Marcus wanted himâ¦ She was definitely ready to share.

Sharing. It was a good concept. A great concept. Even if it was pure fantasy.

But it was enough to distract her. Her mind stopped spinning just a little. Exhaustion took its toll.

Finally she slept.

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She woke to shouting.

So what was new? People shouted in this place all the time. Half the inhabitants of this boarding house were drunk or stoned or both. But this time it was closer than usual.

Her dormitory held eight beds and the last four beds in the row were covered with fighting bodies. Someone was yelling; there were people punching, clawing, rolling.

There was the sound of broken glass and a woman screamed.

She opened her eyes and someone was grabbing her. Lifting.

âPut me down!â It was an instinctive scream of terror.

âDonât draw attention to yourself,â her intended husband told her. âIs this your bag? Shut up and let me get you out of here.â

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Marcus took her back to his apartment. He brooked no argument, hardly speaking until Robert had deposited them at the entrance to his apartment building, until theyâd ridden the lift to the penthouse and he had her behind his closed door.

Even then he wouldnât listen to protests.

âIâm marrying you. That involves keeping you alive until at least tomorrow. So have the sense to obey orders.â

She was still dazed, doped with the pain-killers the doctors had given her. Three quarters asleep. But not so far gone that she couldnât protest. She was balanced precariously on crutches. Heâd carried her out of the seedy backpackersâ but that had been the end of his carrying role. Sheâd emerged to face the doorman of this luxury apartment block on her own two feetâjust. âIâm not good at following orders,â she managed.

âHow did I guess that?â His severe mouth quirked upward into a wry smile. They were standing in the entrance to his apartment and all she could see was black marble and mirrors. If she wasnât so dopey sheâd panic, she thought. She should at least try.

âI canât stay here with you.â

âI guessed youâd say that, too,â he told her. He pointed to three doors. âBathroom, bedroom, kitchen. Iâm staying at my club. Iâll see you in the morning.â

âButâ¦â

She gazed at him, confused beyond belief. This day had got away from her. All she knew was that somehow a day that had started as a disaster had somehow been salvaged, and it had been salvaged because of this man in his lovely suit, with his lovely eyes, with his lovely smile.

Yeah, she was getting maudlin, but he made her feelâ¦ He made her feelâ¦

Not maudlin. Something very different from maudlin.

âThank you,â she whispered.

âItâs okay.â

âI mean it.â She reached forward and took his hand. Then, before he could guess what she intended, she raised her face and kissed him softly on the lips. It was a token kissâa touchâa kiss of gratitude and weariness and need for human comfort. It shouldnât have caused confusion but, as she stepped back, confusion was what she saw in his eyes.

âMarcusâ¦â

âIâd better leave.â His voice was strange. Husky. Unsure.

âYou donât need to.â She could sleep on the settee, she meant to say. She meant to addâ¦something. But tiredness and the drugs sheâd been given had the better of her and she couldnât think of anything more to add.

What had she said? He didnât need to leave? No. She was right. More than that; she very much wanted him to stay. She was so alone.

What a wimp. She caught herself, fighting for her dignity. Fighting through the haze of pain-killers for any sort of sense at all.

âI meantâ¦â

âI know what you meant,â he told her and he smiled. It was his smile that was her undoing, she thought desperately. It was a smile that twisted, distorted, changed her world.

âBut I still think Iâd better go,â he told her. He touched her, a feather-light fingertip tracing of her cheek. Was she imagining thingsâor was there reluctance to leave?

She couldnât tell. She was in no fit state to tell anything at all.

He knew it. He swore softly. âLock the door after me,â he told her. âAnd stay safe until morning. No arguments.â

And that was that. He walked out and slammed the door behind him.

No arguments? She stared at the closed door. How could she argue when he was gone?

She was so befuddled she was past thinking. She gathered her crutches and limped forward, stunned. The first door led to the bedroom. To the bed. It was vast, piled high with a mountain of white pillows.

It looked wonderful.

There was silence all around her. There was silence for the first time since sheâd reached this city.

No argument?

She had no argument at all. She hobbled to the bed, let her crutches fallâand let herself fall.

Wise or not, five minutes later she was asleep. But as she slept her fingers rested on her cheekâwhere Marcusâs fingers had touched.

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And Marcus?

He lay in his bed at his club and he swore into the night. One ceremony and he was finished with her, he thought. One ceremony.

But when heâd walked into that placeâhad seen the louts fightingâmen in a womenâs dormâcrazy with drinkâbroken glassâ¦

And Peta, sleeping as if she was so exhausted she couldnât face waking, even to protect herself.

And then sheâd kissed him. Her kissâ¦ It had been so defenceless. Soâ

So he didnât know what. All he knew was that when sheâd asked that he stay it had taken all his self-possession not to gather her into his arms and sweep her into his bed.

Iâll look after her until she leaves New York, he told himself. Thatâs all Iâll do. And then Iâll forget her.

Yeah, right.

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When Peta had arrived all sheâd seen was the bed. And Marcus. When she woke she finally took in her surroundings and they werenât to her taste at all.

She stretched in the vast, luxurious bed and gazed around her. And winced.

Lat night sheâd been stunned, exhausted and doped with pain-killers. This morningâ¦

This place might be comfortable, silent and safe but it was also sterile.

It was like something out of *Vogue*, she thought, and then

thought, Nope. Not ordinary *Vogue*. Maybe a *Gentlemanâs Hygienic Vogue*, if such a magazine existed.

At a guess it had been decorated by a professional whose brief was clinical, modern and masculine. The place was cool grey and black. Lots of glass and chrome. Nothing out of place.

Ultra expensive.

She tossed back the covers and hobbled the few steps to the window. Not everything met with her disapproval. Below was Central Park. There were horse-drawn carriages driving right by.

The view was lovely.

She turned around to the apartment and winced again. This wasnât lovely. Not a photograph. Not a personal thing. The place looked as sterile as a hotel.

More so.

Who on earth was this man she was marrying? What was she doing in his apartment?

She didnât have time for questions. She glanced at her watch and practically yelped.

The only time the funeral director had been able to fit Hattieâs funeral in was really early.

Likeâ¦in half an hour?

She had to go. Marcus had grabbed her meagre bag of possessions and it was still in the hall. Sheâd wear the suit Marcus had given her yesterday and feel grateful for it. She pressed out the worst of the creases with her hands, showered and dressed in minutes and then she paused at the door, ready to go.

She glanced around the apartment and thought that she wasnât really sorry to leave. The backpacker hotel was awful but if this was homeâ¦ Sheâd hate it almost as much.

It was Marcusâs home.

So what? Marcus was nothing to her. Nothing at all.

CHAPTER FOUR

âMarcusâ¦â

Rubyâs phone call woke Marcus from sleepâwhich was unusual. He was usually awake at dawn, checking the international markets. But heâd lain awake long into the night, deeply disturbed by the events of the day.

Peta had got to him. His intended bride. He didnât know how but sheâd somehow wriggled her way through his defences and made him concerned. More than concerned. Deeply involved.

He hoped she was sleeping. He hoped her bed didnât seem too big and too strange.

The thought of her alone in his barren apartment was hugely unsettling and for the first time ever he found himself wishing heâd spent a bit more time making the place welcoming. Maybe he should indulge in a few cushions or something. It hardly mattered to him. Home was a place to sleep and dump clothes for cleaning. Strangers organised by Ruby came and magically made the place tidy; fixed his gear; left dinners in the refrigerator on the off-chance that heâd get home hungry.

He hardly noticed.

But he wished his apartment was better now, and by the time he finally slept heâd almost decided to call in another decorator. Which would be a real waste. As soon as Peta left he wouldnât be interested in the place again.

So why was he fussed now?

Why was she getting to him?

Heâd slept fitfully and when Ruby woke him his voice was still slow with sleep.

âYou got her out of there?â she demanded.

âWhat?â

âThe backpackersâ place.â Ruby sounded anxious. âYou shifted her?â

âYeah. Sheâs at my place.â

âYour place?â He could hear the quickening of interest and he almost smiled.

âIâm at the club.â

âRight.â She thought that through. âThe club. On the other side of town. Thatâs cosy.â

âWhat is it you want, Ruby?â

âA marriage.â

It was his turn to pause. âThereâs a problem?â

âNot with getting you married. I found a judge whoâs prepared to fit you in, and the legal team have fixed everything up.â

âThen whatâs wrong?â

âItâs the bit about Peta leaving the country that I donât like.â

âWhat donât you like?â

âShe goes home tomorrow?â

âIâd imagine so.â

âAnd youâre staying here.â

âWhat else would I do?â

âA real husband,â Ruby said thoughtfully, âwould go with her.â

Marcus had been lying back on his pillows. Almost relaxed. Now he stirred himself. He focused.

He knew this tone.

âRuby, this is not a serious marriage.â

âThatâs not what the legal eagles are going to say,â Ruby told him. âI had Adam and Gloria run through the ramifications of this thing. They say that if any legal gain hinges on a marriage then the marriage has to be seen to be serious. A simple ceremony and wedding certificate isnât going to cut it. Charles will have it tossed out on the first hearing. Not all your power and influence will make it work unless youâre prepared to spend time together. If you marry the girl, youâre going to have to do it properly.â

âDo it properly? What are you suggesting?â

âWell.â He heard her take a deep breath, as though to launch into something she was unsure of. âAdam and Gloria and I have been thinking.â

Adam and Gloriaâthe firmâs top legal minds. And Ruby. Combined they were his three top people. âAdam and Gloria and you,â he said cautiously, âhave been thinking what?â

âThat you should take a holiday.â

It was his turn to think.

âAre you still there?â she asked.

âI might be.â His tone was cautious.

âYou ever had a holiday?â

âI donât needâ

âMarcus, youâve been making money ever since your mama abandoned you when you were twelve years old,â she told him and Marcus almost dropped the phone.

âWhat the hell?â

âYou think I donât know? You think none of us know? Youâve fought every inch of your life. Every inch. All you know is how to make money, Marcus.â

âRubyâ¦â

âI know.â He could almost hear her holding up her hands, backing off a bit. They didnât intrude into each otherâs personal lives. They never had.

They liked it that way.

But it seemed Ruby was intent on breaking the rules in more ways than one.

âMarcus, I started out in this financial business because my man and my baby were killed in a car crash,â she told him, her normally matter-of-fact voice becoming gentler. âI fill my life with my job now because Iâve done loving and I have nothing left. But youâ¦ You havenât even started.â

Her man and her baby. Ruby had had a man and a baby?

Theyâd been killed?

He hadnât known that. Hell, why hadnât he known that?

Heâd never asked. Heâd understood that there was something in her history but heâd never asked. It hadnât been his business.

And sheâd never intruded into his space, either.

So why now? âYouâre telling me I need to fall in love?â he ventured, and he was rewarded by Rubyâs rich chuckle. She laughed so rarely. It made him thinkâ¦

What did it make him think? How little he knew this woman? How crazy was the suggestion she was making?

âWeâre not expecting miracles here,â Ruby told him. âBut Adam and Gloria and I, we figured youâve just tied up the e-commerce deal for Forde and thereâs nothing happening over the next few weeks we canât handle. We figure if youâre serious about validating this marriage, then you need to take a holiday.

You need to see Australia.â

âA few days wonât make a difference,â he told her and she had all the answers.

âA few days wonât. Two weeks will. Weâve checked. The Amerson v. Amerson case sets the precedent. The Amersons married, had a two-week honeymoon, and then separated to work in different countries. They rang each other once a week and e-mailed lots. He was killed, his wife inherited, but his brother sued for his estate, claiming the marriage wasnât valid. The judge decreed it was fine. So thatâs the precedent youâre planning to use. Two weeks in Australia, Marcus, followed by the odd phone call and e-mail. Itâs that or forget it.â

âTwo weeks?â

âAt least.â

âI canât.â

âYou can.â He heard the smile in her voice. âYou know you can. Sheâs a nice kid.â

âSheâs a what?â

âNo? You tell me what else she is, Marcus,â Ruby said gentlyâand replaced the receiver without another word.

Leaving him stunned.

Leaving him totally bemused.

He should pull out of this right now, he thought grimly. He stared up at the gilt ceiling of the ornate club bedroom and he thought things through. Or he tried to. Things were getting really muddled.

He thought of where heâd found Peta last night.

He thought of where heâd beenâhow hard heâd fought to get where he was.

He thought of Ruby, not telling him all these years about her baby and her man. And he thought about why heâd never asked.

He thought of Peta, taking his hands, kissing himâ¦

A holiday. What harm would two weeks do?

What harm indeed?

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âAshes to ashes. Dust to dust.â

Peta stood in the garishly decorated funeral chapel and listened to the priest intone words of farewell to her beloved

Hattie.

There was no one else. Charles hadnât come. Of course he hadnât. Sheâd disliked Charles for a long time, but nowâ¦ She gazed at the plain wooden coffin and tried hard not to think about how distressed Hattie would be if she knew her son wasnât here to say goodbye.

She tried instead to think of the good times. Of the Hattie sheâd known and lovedâthe Hattie whoâd been a mother figure to her for so long.

The good times refused to surface. It distressed her immeasurably that Hattie was being farewelled here, instead of in Hattieâs own beloved church back in Australia. She hated the whole thing. That she was being forced to marry a stranger to protect her legacyâa man whose motives she couldnât begin to understand.

Marriage. The idea seemed crazy. It was a figment of her imaginationâpart of the nightmare that was yesterday. Her feelings for Marcus must have been induced by pain and by drugs, she decided. Today he was a hazy memory.

Today all she could focus on was Hattie.

The coffin was right before her. It was the only real and tangible thing in this whole mess. The priest was murmuring the last blessing, casting Peta an apologetic glance as he did so. He was a kindly man. He could tell she was distressed at this curt service, but he had three more of these to do this morning.

The curtain swung closed in front of the coffinâand it was over.

âSheâll have been really glad that you were here.â

The sound of the familiar voice made her jump, and when Marcusâs hand came lightly down on her shoulder he had no idea how close she came to turning into his broad shoulder to weep. Marcus a hazy memory? It seemed she was mistaken. He was very, very real.

âM-Marcus.â

âI went back to my apartment and found you were already gone. Then Ruby rang and said the service was now. Iâm sorry I didnât make it earlier.â

âButâ¦ Why?â

âI thought you might need a bit of support,â he told her. âAnd I also figured thatâs what husbands are for.â He smiled, a

gentle smile that was close to being her undoing. âYou loved her.â

It was a statementânot a questionâand Peta nodded.

âIâve been doing a little research.â He cast an uncertain look at the curtained end of the roomâthey both did. There was the sound of wheelsâone coffin making way for the next. Peta tried really hard to concentrate on what he was saying. âYour aunt only came back to the States when she became ill,â Marcus told her, apparently seeking confirmation of someoneâs research. âAt Charlesâs insistence.â

âAustralia was her home,â Peta said drearily. âBut Charles wanted his mother to die here.â

âWhy?â

âCanât you guess?â Peta shrugged. âHe made a flying visit to Australia when the doctors told her she had very little time, and he insisted she come back with him. Hattieâ¦ I think at that stage Hattie was so grateful he was taking an interest that sheâd agree to anything. She came. Then, whenever I rang, she said things were fine. She was even getting better, she said. Only suddenly she stopped ringing and Charles wouldnât answer my calls. I worried and worried and finally it was too much. I got on a plane and came.â

She didnât add that sheâd spent all her savings. Everything.

Marcus was calmly watching her, obviously seeing her distress. âAnd Charles wasnât doing the right thing by her?â

âWhat do you think? Of course he wasnât. There wasâ¦nothing. She was Australian. She had no health insurance. She wasnât being treated. She was so much worse and heâd put her in a really horrid nursing home and abandoned her. She was so glad to see me. So glad. She was really confused. I found a doctor to see her but by then it was far too late to have any effect. The cancer had done something to her calcium levels, the doctor told me, so she was only having glimpses of reality but at least she knew I was here. She died a week after I arrived.â

âHaving changed her will in favour of her son.â

She shook her head, bleakness threatening to overwhelm her. âIt was her right.â

âI think Iâm going to enjoy this wedding,â Marcus said grimly and then he glanced at Petaâs pale face and obviously decided

against pushing his anger further. There was another funeral waiting to happen. This wasnât the timeâor the place.

âLet me buy you something to eat.â

âNo.â She hauled herself together. âNo, thank you.â

The undertaker was approaching now, an anxious little man, clearly wanting to clear the room so that the next sad little ceremony could take place. He looked at Marcus with obvious curiosity. And then his eyes widened in recognition. âMarcusâ*Marcus Benson*?â

âYes.â Marcus held out his hand in greeting and the manâs slightly impatient expression slipped away.

âDonât hurry,â he told them. âThereâs another funeral due but take your time.â

âWe will. Thank you.â Marcusâs glance was dismissive but Peta edged towards the door.

âI need to go.â

âStay.â

âN-No.â

âAre you afraid of me?â he asked, his tone softening. âYou know, fearâs no basis for a marriage.â

âIâm not afraid of you. I donât even know you. And thatâs no basis for a marriage, either.â

âNo.â He paused. âNo, itâs not. And therein lies the problem.â

âThereâs a problem?â

âThere is.â

âWell, thenâ¦â She cast another uncertain glance at the curtains, as if unsure whether she should move on. But outside there was a group of mourners gathered, and the funeral director had moved back to wait respectfully by the door. He wouldnât hurry a man of Marcusâs stature, but he was still anxious.

Hattie wasnât behind the velvet curtain, Peta told herself. Hattie had gone.

Her future had probably gone as well. This man had offered her a solution which was as crazy as it was unworkable. What was he saying? That there was a problem?

âWell, then.â She did an almost visible regroup. âWell, then. Thereâs no need even to tell me what the problem is. This whole marriage idea was a crazy, unworkable plan. I need to catch a plane tomorrow and you, Iâm sure, have work to do. Thank you

for coming this morning. Thank you for your accommodation last night.â Her voice faltered just a little. âIâ¦ Iâm very grateful. I sort of needed someone.â

âAnyone,â he agreed, and she smiled.

âYou were a very nice anyone.â

âGee, thanks.â

âWell, itâs not every day that a girl gets an offer of marriage from someone as neat as you.â She looked over to the funeral director and gave him a reassuring smile. âItâs okay. Weâre leaving.â She put her hand out and shook Marcusâs, a firm shake of farewell. Moving on. Fast. Before she broke down. She didnât know whether it was Hattieâs death or the fact that she was so far from homeâor that sheâd just allowed herself a glimmer of crazy hope with this mad marriage schemeâ¦

She had to get out of there. Fast.

âGoodbye,â she muttered and turned away before he could see her faceâbut he wasnât letting go. He held her hand and turned her back to face him. âNo.â

âNo?â

âItâs still on,â he told her. âThe marriage.â He smiled, a funny lopsided smile that was amazingly endearing. âRuby says I can marry you.â

âWell, bully for Ruby.â She paused. âYour assistant gave you permission to marry?â

âNo.â Marcus cast an uncertain glance across at the undertaker. The manâs ears were practically flapping. âUmâ¦ Well, yes. Ruby does the busy work. Sheâs figured out the things we need. The formalities. As well as that, I asked her to run the will past a couple of my lawyers. Itâd be a waste if we were to marry and not be able to overturn the will.â

âA waste,â she said blankly.

âWell, it would.â He held out a placating hand to the undertaker. âFive more minutes.â Then back to Peta. âYou see, the lawyers are of the opinion that if you married me and got on the plane tomorrow and I stayed here, then Charles could argue that the marriage was a farce.â

âSo what are you saying?â Her eyes widened. âAre you saying we have to consummate the marriage?â

The undertaker gave a start. The little man choked, met Marcusâs eye and carefully backed out of the door. A little. Not

out of earshot.

Marcus grinned. âNo, we donât have to consummate the marriage.â

âWell, thatâs a relief.â

âI thought you might say that.â

She smiled. It was a weak sort of smile but it was a smile for all that. It was the first time sheâd smiled that day and it felt okay. More. It felt good.

She was so grateful to this man, she realised. Even if his crazy plan didnât come to fruitionâas it surely couldnâtâhis presence over these two days had lightened her load immeasurably.

Heâd made her smile. Heâd made her feel as if somebody cared.

She forced herself to focus on practicalities. Somehow.

âSo we donât consummate the marriage. What do we do?â

âRuby says we need a honeymoon,â he told her. âIt seems, legally, we need to spend some time together if weâre to be seen as truly married. Iâve just finished stitching together a deal which has taken nearly three years to pull off. Ruby tells me I havenât taken a holiday in ten years and I guess sheâs right. Sheâs just read me the riot act and told me that if I donât take some time off Iâll drop dead from overwork. Anywayâ¦â He gave a grin that was half amused, half embarrassed. âAnyway, if youâd like a honeymoonâ¦ If youâd likeâ¦I could come back to Australia with you for a couple of weeks.â

She stared at him. Stunned. âYouâre kidding.â

âI never kid.â

âYou want to come home with me?â

He grinned again. âThereâs no need to say it like Iâm a stray dog.â

âI donât want you.â

âThereâs gratitude.â

She tried taking a breath. It didnât quite come off. âIâm sorry.â She shook her head. âNo. Iâm not sorry. I donât want a husband.â

âThatâs good, because I donât want a wife.â He shrugged, still smiling. âBut Ruby says I offered and I ought to go through with it. Iâve never been to Australia.â

âThis is crazy. You canât just take two weeks offâfor a

stranger.â

âI canâfor a holiday.â

âYou meanâ¦ Youâd go off on a tour or something?â

âRuby says Iâd need to stay at your farm.â

âDo you *want* to stay at my farm?â

âNo.â

âThenâ¦â

âBut Iâm prepared to.â

She shook her head. âMarcus, I donât think I can cope with that level of obligation.â

âI can understand that. But maybeâif you want the farm badly enough, you need to swallow your pride and accept my help. Accept that I can afford to give it and accept that Iâll ask nothing in return.â He smiled. âExcept a small glow of virtue which I promise Iâll keep under my smug little hat.â He caught her hands and held them, and he looked down at her, his gaze strong and sure. Compelling. âAre you strong enough to accept this? Takingâs hard, Peta. I know that. Butâmaybe you have no choice.â

His smile faded. He might be as confused as she was but he didnât seem to be showing it. His gaze said *trust me*. His gaze told her he knew the direction she should take; she just had to let him take the lead. Do what he said.

To let a stranger help her in such a wayâ¦ It seemed crazy. Impossible. But his eyes said *trust me*. His eyes said *let me take the lead.*

And for Peta, whoâd never had anyone take the lead in her life, the concept was suddenly almost overpoweringly appealing.

âNo strings?â

âNo strings.â

âIâll knit you a pair of socks for Christmas.â

âThat would be very nice,â he told her and she choked.

âYou havenât seen my knitting.â

âBut youâll accept?â

âI donât have a choice,â she said simply. âIâm very grateful. I hate that I need to be grateful, so I guessâ¦ Youâre just going to have to get used to my socks!â

Â

He ushered her next door to a coffee shop, he ordered pastries

and coffee and she didnât argue. She even ate something.

They ate in silence. She was achingly aware that he was watching herâthat she was being somehow measuredâbut there was nothing she could do about it.

She wasnât even sure that she minded.

âWhat happened to your parents?â he asked at last, and Peta felt her insides twist. It was as if this man could really read her mind. The sensation was incredibly unnerving.

âMy mother died having Harry,â she told him. âEclampsia. My father was killed when his tractor rolled ten years ago.â

âAnd youâve been it ever since.â

âIt?â

âProvider.â

âThere was Hattie,â she told him.

âSo Hattie looked after you?â

âI was sixteen.â

âSo Hattie didnât look after you?â

âI was strong. I could run the farm. I loved Hattie and I couldnât have coped without her, but she had crippling arthritis.â

âSo let me get this straight,â he said, obviously thinking it through. âYou were sixteen when you were left on a farm with four other children. The oldest was how old?â

âDaniel was eleven.â

âAnd your cousin? Charles?â

âHeâs a lot older than me. He left before my father died. Hattie sent her share of the farm profits to him, and we only saw him when he wanted more money.â She bit her lip. âShe didnât knowâ¦ Hattie didnât understand how successful Charles was. He kept needing more.â

But Marcus wasnât interested in how successful Charles was. He was focused on Peta. âSo youâd have been sixteen. You were still at school?â

âIt didnât hurt me to leave. I loved farming.â

âYou mean you had to leave.â

âYes,â she admitted honestly. âI had to.â

âAnd what about now?â

âI run a really successful farm.â

âDo the boys help?â

âOf course they do. Only Daniel and Christopher are at university now and William is at a special school in the city.â She smiled, thinking of her high-achieving brothers. âDaniel will be a vet and Christopher is in first year law. And William is brilliant. He won a scholarship to a special school for gifted kids.â

âButâyou support them all?â He sounded appalled and she shook her head.

âNo. They all help. During the holidays.â

âBut the rest of the time thereâs just you?â

âAnd Harry.â Her smile widened, thinking with real affection of the baby of the family. âHarryâs great. Youâll loveâ¦â She caught herself and changed the tense. âYouâd like Harry.â

âWhen I meet him.â

âThereâs no need for you to meet him.â

âThereâs every need,â he said brusquely. âI thought I explained it to you. Whereâs Harry now?â

âStowing away in Danielâs university college.â She hesitated. âHe was unhappy about me being away. Heâs only twelve. So we thought that if he could stay with the boys heâd be happier. The kids are great. Theyâre looking after him. But I need to get back.â

âI can see that you do.â He was staring at her as if sheâd grown two heads. âYou carry all this load on your shouldersâ¦â

âHey, theyâre my family,â she said, not liking his tone of absolute astonishment. âWhat would you do?â

What would he do? They stared at each other and she thought that he really didnât have a clue. He knew nothing of what she had. Of the benefits as well as the responsibilities.

Heâd turn away, she thought. Heâd run. What man would willingly come within a thousand miles of the sort of responsibility she carried?

But he didnât turn away. Instead, he glanced across her shoulder and smiled and she turned to the coffee shop window to see Ruby waving from the pavement.

âWhat will I do?â Marcus asked, his voice suddenly almost teasing. Almost laughing. He waved back to Ruby, beckoning her in. âIâll tell you what to do. Iâll hand you over to Ruby to turn you into a bride. I have a deal to stitch up and then Iâm free. Iâll

marry you and carry you back to Australia. For two weeks. On two conditions.â

âWhat are they?â

âThat you donât make me milk a cow! And you donât put me in charge of a twelve-year-old.â

Â

If Marcus was forceful, Ruby was worse. She shooed Marcus back to work and outlined her plans. Which left Peta stunned. Ruby had a vision of a white wedding and nothing was going to deflect herâand the wedding was scheduled in four hoursâ time.

âI can get married in what Iâm wearing,â Peta said, totally confounded, but Ruby would have none of it.

âMarcus Benson has half the women of the world wanting to marry himâand youâre going to wear a day dress?â Ruby smiled, somehow managing to rob her words of offence. âPeta, heâs doing you a favour. The least you can do is accept in the manner itâs intended.â

It sounded reasonableâsort of. There was only one thing for it, Peta decided. She needed to swallow her pride. âIâm broke,â she confessed.

Ruby hesitated, but only for a moment. âYeah. You are. But Mr Benson has given me a fat cheque to outfit you for the wedding. He told me to do it subtly but I donât know how. Except by telling you that youâd be doing all of us a favour by accepting.â

A fat cheque. Peta drew in her breath. âI thought I told himââ

âYeah, you told him. He said yesterday that heâd offended you. He said he tried to dress you as a socialite and you tossed it back in his face.â

âI didnâtâ¦â

âWell, I would have, too,â Ruby said honestlyâunexpectedly. âAnd I think more of you for doing it. But throwing back corporate suits and refusing wedding gowns are different things.â

âHeâs notâ¦ I donât seeâ¦â

âYou are marrying him,â Ruby said gently. âYou know you are. And you neednât feel guilty that youâre doing so. Thereâs no way Marcus will marry anyone else.â

âBut I canât accept his money,â Peta said with distress, and

Ruby reached out and gave her hand a squeeze.

âYes, you can. Youâd be doing Marcus a real favour.â

âHow am I supposed to accept that?â Peta demanded. âThis is ridiculous. I know nothing about Marcusâand here he is, threatening to take over my life.â

âHeâs not, you know. Heâs simply involving himself. For the first time ever.â

âI have no idea what you mean.â

âYou know nothing about him?â

âNo. Apart from his awful mother. But just because his mother stuffed her life doesnât mean he should stay isolated for ever.â

âYou know he fought in the Gulf War,â Ruby told her, and the statement was so far out of left field that Peta blinked. Marcus had disappeared in the car that had brought Ruby here, but his presence still lingered. His coffee mug was still on the table before them and Peta found herself glancing at it as if it held some answers. Which was plainly ridiculous.

âYou know Marcus came from a poor background?â Ruby probed.

What did this have to do with her? âHe told me.â

âDid he tell you he invested the first dime he ever made?â Ruby gave a cautious sideways look. âHeâs good at making money. Seriously good. And heâs smart. One of his stepdads introduced him to computers and the manâs never looked back. He had investments in the Internet before most people had ever heard of it. But he couldnât escape his backgroundâor lack of it. He was one seriously deprived kid. His mother disappeared when he was twelve and from then he was truly alone. He fought tooth and nail and he got a bit behind him. When the last of his foster families threw him out, he joined the army. Heaven knows why. Iâd imagineâ¦ Heâd never belonged anywhere. Maybe the army promised a sense of family. Or maybe it was that he wasnât all that interested in living.â

âRuby, thatâs awful.â

âSo was his stint with the armed forces,â Ruby said bluntly. âIâm not supposed to know this, you understand, but a sergeant in his regiment came to see him one day when Marcus was out of town. Darrellâs had a hard timeâhe was pretty badly scarred and

down on his luck and on impulse I invited him to share lunch. So I did and I got the full story of what Marcus went through. Okay, we were on the winning side, but Darrellâ¦ He said they saw so much death. Darrell said at the start of the campaign Marcus was an outgoing guy who could share a joke but the more killing they saw the quieter he grew. And then his battalion was caught in an ambush. Most of them were killed. And for Marcusâ¦ It was the end. At least thatâs the way I see it. Heâs internalised it; heâs never talked about it and heâs just shrivelled. He came back and he concentrated on building an empire thatâs stunned the world. But thereâs nothing else. And then along comes you.â

Peta stared at her across the table, at this big kindly woman with trouble in her eyes.

âAlong came me? What have I got to do with it?â

âHe cares,â Ruby told her. âFor the first time. He cares what happens to you. He really cares. Heâs thinking about your welfare and heâs offered to marry you. With pride. Even if the marriage will only last for two weeks, youâre the only bride heâll ever have. Think about that, Peta. Do you really want to knock back his offer to make you a bride? You donât think you could possibly bring yourself to play the part?â

âButâ¦ How? Why?â

Ruby smiled, reaching across the table and taking Petaâs work-worn hands in hers. âAll I know is that heâs agreed to stop making money for two weeks. Heâs agreed to care for you a little. I thinkâ¦ If you were to pay him back by making it funâ¦â

âFun?â

âI suspect,â Ruby said slowly, âthat itâs a concept both of you have trouble with.â She smiled some more, and there was a tinge of real regret in her eyes. âYou know, itâs not illegal. And, as for meâ¦ You know, Marcus has just given me a cheque for an obscene amount of money to organise a wedding.â She hesitated. And the look on her face changed. âYou know, I had a daughter once,â she whispered. âIf Amy had lived sheâd be just about your age. I could be buying her a wedding dress.â

Peta stared at her. Dumbfounded. There were needs all over the place here. Not just hers. Not just her brothers. There was Marcus. And now there was Ruby. âSo itâs not just me and Marcus who need to have fun?â she ventured.

âIs it ever just the two of you?â Rubyâs eyes held lingering

pain. âIâve learned the hard way to keep to myself and no, itâs not much fun. But todayâ¦ Maybe today and for the next two weeks, we could all let our barriers down.â Her smile returned, and there was a hint of pleading behind the tired eyes. âIf youâd like, if youâd let me, what Iâd really like to do is make you the most beautiful bride the world has ever seen. Show the world what a bride should look likeâsee how much we can achieve in a few short hours. And thenâ¦â A hint of mischief appeared behind her smile. âIâd like to write up the most beautiful gilt invitation and have it hand delivered to Charles Higginsâmarked urgent.â

Charles. At least Charles was neutral territory. âYou donât like Charles, either?â

âI canât stand the man.â Ruby rose and stood, smiling down at Peta and her smile was a challenge. âWell. What do you think? Are you prepared to put aside a few scruples and have fun?â

âYou mean, do the full bridal bit?â

âIt would be great,â Ruby admitted and there was a real trace of wistfulness in her voice. âMarcus can afford it. The manâs so wealthy this is less than pin money. And a weddingâa real weddingâin four hours. It would be fun. Wouldnât it?â

Peta stared up at her. More and more she didnât understand what was happeningâmore and more she felt as if she was right out of control. But if she was so far out of control why not go the whole way? Why clutch at traces of dignity that were impossible to maintain?

Why not haveâ¦fun?

âA white bride,â she whispered.

âThe whole works.â Ruby was beaming. âI know just the place.â

âItâs crazy.â

âBut wonderful?â

âMarcus would run a mile.â

âMarcus is committed. He goes through with his promises.â Rubyâs smile deepened. âLetâs do the whole thing. I know where his sergeant livesâitâs half an hour from here. Can you cope with me as a matron of honour and Darrell as best man? And Iâll bet Charles will come. Heâll arrive expecting to see a farce and what heâll see is the works.â

âThe works?â

âLetâs do it.â Ruby held out her hand to pull her to her feet. âWhy not?â

âI can think of a thousand reasons why not.â

âDo any of them matter more than enjoying yourself?â Ruby glanced across the street to the funeral parlour and winced. âLifeâs for living. Come on. I dare you.â

CHAPTER FIVE

MARCUS was running late. Once heâd got back to his office there were a thousand things that needed to be sorted. To leave for Australia at this short notice seemed impossible.

But Ruby had been there before him, making the impossible somehow inevitable. Every one of his staff seemed intent on pushing him out of the place!

So somehow heâd done it. Heâd pushed himself to the limit, but even Robertâs skilled driving hadnât been able to get him across town right on time.

He was ten minutes lateâ¦

âI hope your bride hasnât beaten you,â Robert said, and when Marcus glanced at his chauffeurâs face in the rear-view mirror he found he was grinning.

âJust how many people know Iâm getting married this afternoon?â he demanded, and Robert chuckled.

âIâm thinking just about the whole world. The phone in the outer office has been running hot. I gather you havenât been exactly quiet with your wedding plans.â

No. No, he hadnât.

What would happen if there were photographers there? he thought suddenly. What if the press had heard about it? He hoped to heaven that Ruby had been able to persuade Peta to buy a dress.

Something pretty.

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Peta stood in the outer office of the Justiceâs offices and felt absurd. But strangelyâ¦good. Light. Free.

Ruby had been right. It had been the best fun. Theyâd gone to the biggest bridal emporium in New York and when Ruby had explained that it was a rush job, that the wedding was this afternoon, that Peta was marrying Marcus Benson and that money was no object, theyâd fallen over themselves to help.

And Peta, whoâd lived in a nightmare for so long, had simply acquiesced. Or more than acquiesced, she admitted. Sheâd tried

on one exquisite creation after another. The dress they chose was, in the end, comparatively simpleâdeceptively so. Of magnificent ivory silk, it had tiny shoestring shoulder-straps and a scooped sweetheart neckline. It looked as if it had been made for her. It clung like a second skin to her tiny waist and then floated out in diaphanous folds, falling softly to her ankles.

Sheâd stood before the mirror and Ruby had gazed at her, her eyes had misted and sheâd breathed, âYes!â

The thing had been decided.

Theyâd found her strappy white sandals, and an urgently called beautician had threaded white ribbons through her auburn hair and applied make-up. Just a little. âWith that tan and that complexion you need to cover nothing. Oh, my dear, you look so beautiful.â

And she did. The Peta who stared back at herself from the long mirror in the bridal parlour seemed unrecognisable.

Then, at Petaâs insistence, the bridal team had turned their attention to Ruby because, âIf Iâm doing this, then so are you!â Protesting but laughing, Ruby had allowed herself to be talked into a pale blue suit of the finest shantung. The sales-girls had found the dearest little hat and matching shoes; the beautician had decided there was time to give Rubyâs curls the most modish of cuts, and Ruby had ended up almost as dazed as Peta.

The team in the bridal parlour had arranged a car to bring them hereâa white limousine!âtheyâd organised white orchids, and at the last minute theyâd thrust champagne glasses into their hands and theyâd poured champagne for themselves as the limousine departed towards their date with Marcus.

âAnd I bet they put that on Marcusâs bill,â Ruby whispered. They sipped their champagne; they looked at themselves in stunned aweâand then they did what any sane, mature women would have done in the same position.

They giggled.

On arrival, theyâd learned that Marcus wasnât there yet but Darrell wasâMarcusâs sergeant. Heâd done them proud as well, dressed in full military regalia, looking so gorgeous that Peta hardly noticed the scars on his burned face.

âIâm real happy for you,â Darrell told her. âMarcus deserves someone to make him happy. He was so damned good to meâ¦â

He broke off, choked, and Peta knew how he felt.

She was pretty choked herself.

âYouâre sure heâll come?â she whispered to Ruby and Ruby gave a smile that said she was as nervous as Peta. The giggles had disappeared.

âI surely hope so. Or youâre just going to have to marry Darrell.â

Great. Peta glanced nervously out the window at the street. There were a cluster of photographers in the doorwayâobviously waiting for someone important. Theyâd been here when she arrived. Theyâd ignored Petaâthereâd been three brides arrive since Peta hadâbut they were obviously intent on someone else.

âThis is crazy,â Peta whispered. She looked down at her beautiful bouquet of white orchids and she couldnât believe what she was seeing. âThe whole thingâ¦ Itâs a crazy dream. I canâtâ¦â

But then she paused. A car she recognised pulled up out the front. Robert emerged, and then Marcus.

Marcus, looking impossibly handsome. Marcus in a dark suit with, for heavenâs sake, a tiny white orchid twisted in his lapel.

Herâ¦husband?

It was all she could do not to turn and run. Run for her life. But Ruby was taking her arm and beaming as if sheâd won the lottery, and Darrell was between Peta and the door and there was nothing to do but wait. Wait until heâd run the gamut of photographers.

Wait until he reached his bride.

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The door opened and he saw her.

For a moment he thought he must be in the wrong place. Heâd been expecting a bureaucratâs office. An official behind the desk. Peta in some sort of more respectable outfit that Ruby had persuaded her to buy.

Insteadâ¦

Instead he had a bride.

He froze. For one awful moment he was transported back to the nightmare of his childhood. To the glitz and glitter of his motherâs dreadful weddings.

But the momentary impression was just that. Momentary. This was no nightmare. This was Peta. Sheâd been speaking to

Ruby but she turned as he entered and she looked up at him.

She smiled.

Until this minute heâd thought that all white weddings were a nightmare. All his life heâd remembered the gaudy, tinselly creations his mother had worn and heâd felt ill.

But this was different. It had to be. Petaâs dress was simple but breathtakingly beautiful.

Peta was beautiful. Her smile widened. Her eyes locked with his.

And in that instant something inside Marcus that heâd hardly known existed shattered and evaporated as if it had never been. The thought that nothing or no one could ever move him.

Heâd never thought any woman could be so lovely.

Maybe she wasnât lovely in the way that the tabloids described loveliness, he thought, dazed. Her hair was still a mop of tousled curlsâno amount of brushing could hide that. Her nose was snub and she had freckles from a lifetime in the sun. But her dressâ¦ Her dress clung to her perfect figure in a soft cloud of white silk. The white ribbons through her beautiful hair were more beautiful than any veil.

No. It wasnât her dress. It wasnât the bride thing. It was her eyesâ¦her smileâ¦the way she looked at him, half apologetic, half daring, wanting him to share this moment, wanting him to laugh, to smile, to simply share her pleasure.

She was smiling and smiling, and it was enough to make his heart lurch. Marcus Bensonâs heart. Immutable. Untouchable.

Sheâd ditched her crutches and she lookedâ¦perfect.

No. How could she be perfect? Perfection was an illusion. It was crazy. Concentrate on something other than that smile.

Petaâs wasnât the only smile. Ruby was there as wellâa Ruby he hardly recognised, in a soft blue suit that made her lookâ¦well, softer somehow. As if that awful shell sheâd built around her had somehow cracked.

Ruby had spoken of a man and a child in her past, but Ruby had worked for him for years and had said nothing before about her private life. How on earth had the advent of Peta into their lives allowed her to lift herself out of her past?

Because that was what had happened. Ruby was smiling from Marcus and back to Peta and the look she directed at Peta was one of pure pride.

And then there was Darrell. How had Darrell got to know about this? Darrell was normally a dour, middle-aged man to whom life had not been kind. His wife had left him during the agonies of skin grafts; he was still deeply traumatised by the events in the Gulf and the ex-serviceman had little to smile about. But nowâ¦ Now Darrell was dressed in full military regalia and he, too, was smiling, as if this was a true weddingâa true happy ever after.

Which it wasnât. The idea was ridiculous.

Totally ridiculous.

But Peta was still smiling at him and, as he walked towards her, she slipped her hand in his arm and held it as if he was already hers. It was a purely proprietorial gesture.

It should have made him run a mile.

But there were three people smiling at himâfour, if you counted the man behind the desk. And outside was the press. The world was waiting to see if he could make this commitment.

It wasnât a commitment, he told himself, and there was more than a trace of desperation in his inner monologue. It was a piece of paper. Nothing more.

He should hold himself stiffly. He shouldnât smile. He should get this over with fast and move on.

But not to smile would be stupid. Maybe itâd even be cruel when everyone else was waiting.

He stared at Peta once more and it was too much. The corners of his mouth curved. His eyes lit. He smiledâ¦

He smiled just for her.

He took her hand in hisâfirmly, with no hesitation in the world. And they turned to the man who was waiting to marry them. They made their vows.

Man and wife.

âI now pronounce you man and wifeâ¦â

For two weeks?

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Theyâd forgotten Charles.

Ruby had organised his invitation but no one had thought of him again. But as the official words faded and Marcus stared down at his bride, stunned by the enormity of what had just happened, the door burst open and in walked Petaâs cousin.

To say he was angry would be an understatement. The man was nearly apoplectic. Charles stood in the doorway, his eyes almost starting from their sockets. His expensive three-piece suit denoted him as an executive, but the uncontrolled fury on his face was more that of a petty criminal. A thug. When Peta turned to see who it was, he lunged straight at her.

He would have hit her. Heâd hit her before. Marcus saw that at a glance. He saw Peta flinch and he saw her body brace.

This man had lived with Peta, he thought grimly. Thereâd been enough violence in Marcusâs past for him to recognise the pattern.

Thereâd also been enough violence in Marcusâs past for him to react, and to react fast. In one swift movement, Peta was thrust behind him, and his body was protecting her from her cousinâs angry rush.

âYou littleâ¦â Charles moved sideways as if to grab her but Marcus was faster. He had him by the shoulders, holding him in a grip of steel.

âWhat the hell do you think youâre doing?â

âThatâ¦slut!â Charles was beyond logic. Heâd come here at a run; he was out of breath and he was out of control. He shoved against Marcusâs hold but he was going nowhere.

Foiled, he was forced to explain. To try to voice his fury.

âI got to the office after lunch to receive this.â He hauled back from Marcusâs grasp and pulled the invitation from his top pocket. âThis! I donât know how she conned youââ

âNo one conned me.â Marcusâs voice was flint-hard, cold as ice.

âShe must have. That slut, thatââ

âStop. Right now. Youâre talking about my wife!â

Wife.

The word acted like a wall of ice water. Charles flinched. And stared.

âItâs not possible. Petaâ¦ Your wife? Why would you want to marry *her*?â

Somehow Marcus managed to hold himself in check. Just. âYouâre being offensive.â

âItâs she whoâs being offensive,â Charles spat. âSheâs just doing this to rob me of what rightfully belongs to me. The

farmâs mine. I went to all the trouble to drag the old lady back hereââ

Enough.

âGet out.â Marcus turned to the official who was standing, mouth agape, staring in stunned amazement. âDo you have security guards in the building?â

âI was invited,â Charles hissed.

âThe invitation is rescinded.â

âSoâs your marriage. Marriage? This marriage is a mockery. Itâs illegal. You canât just marry her and walk away with my property. Iâll have it annulled.â

âI have no intention of marrying Peta and walking away,â Marcus said, deliberately misunderstanding him. âIâm taking Peta back to Australia.â Then, as Peta pushed her way out from behind him, Marcus put his arm around her and pulled her in to him. They stood arm in arm. Man and wife.

âIâm taking Peta home,â he said gently, his eyes on Charlesâs face. âIn all honour.â

âYouâve neverâ¦ Youâll neverâ¦â

âI am. Get used to it.â He looked across at Darrell. âDarrell, if there arenât security guards to deal with *this*â¦ââhe said the word *this* as if it referred to some lower form of pond scumââthen could you help me evict him?â

âWith pleasure,â Darrell told him.

âIâll help,â Ruby added.

âHey, me, too,â Peta put in. âHeâs my cousin. I should get to slug him.â

âBrides donât slug,â Marcus told her and she managed a smile. Albeit a shaky one.

âNot?â

âDefinitely not.â

âRats.â

âYou have something else to do,â Ruby reminded her. âSomething important.â Marcusâs assistant glanced at Charles as if he was of no significance at all. âIf youâve quite finished?â

âI havenât.â Charles backed to the door as Darrell took a measured step towards him. âYouâll hear from my lawyers.â

âI hope they have better party manners than you do,â Marcus

told him. Then he deliberately turned away from the man and faced Ruby. âWhat has my bride forgotten to do?â

My brideâ¦ It sounded strange. It was a declaration of intentionâa declaration that, come what may, Charlesâs lawyers couldnât hurt her.

It was a gesture of pure protection and, as he made it, Marcus thought, whoa, where am I going? But he couldnât unsay it. He couldnât unfeel it.

He looked down into her face and, as Darrell slammed the door behind her obnoxious cousin, he could see that she was as confused as he was. He was offering protection, but to Peta protection seemed an unknown sensation. Sheâd fought her own battles, he thought, and somehow, he knew her battles had been just as hard as his own.

The knowledge intensified the sensation. It made him feel even more at sea. Moreâ¦helpless?

This was an illusion, he told himself. The way he felt about her. The way he held her, pulling her in to his body. It was a faÃ§ade put on to convince Charles that here was a real marriage.

But Charles had gone now. There was no one here they had to fool, yet Marcus was still holding her and there was no way he was releasing her. No way!

âWhatâs she forgotten to do?â Marcus asked again, and it was Ruby who pulled them all together, Ruby who collected herself. She looked to the official who was still standing in astonishment that the wedding could be so rudely interrupted. But this was a senior official whoâd obviously overseen some very strange marriages in his time. He rose to the occasion as a good official should.

âCan we continue?â Ruby prodded, and the man stopped staring at the closed door and managed a smile.

âRight. Where was I? Goodness me. I know. I now pronounce you man and wife.â He took a deep breath and beamed at the pair of them, from Marcus to Peta and back again. The interruption might have been strange and unsettling, but standing before him were a couple whose body language said they belonged. Someone else may have tried to ruin this occasion but Henry Richard Waterhouse, officiating for the City of New York, was here to marry these people and marry them he would.

âThatâs it, folks,â he said. He closed his book. âExcept for the last bit. The best bit. My favourite part of the day. And here it comes.â His beam widened. âYou may now kiss the bride.â

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No.

The word rose unbidden. No. But he didnât say it. Somehow he managed to cut it off. Somehowâ¦

Marcus stared down at Peta and, for heavenâs sake, he saw panic there. It was the same panic he felt himself.

They were staring at each other, stunned, as if neither could believe it had come to this. That this wild planning had suddenly landed them in this place, where there was nothing to do but for Marcus to lift his hand, to tilt her chin, for his eyes to lock with hers.

And for his mouth to lower on to hers.

He didnât want to do it. He didnâtâ¦

He lied. He wanted to do it more than anything in the world.

And it was only a kiss, he told himself fiercely. It meant no more than their signatures on a piece of paper.

It was only a kiss.

But then his lips touched hers and it was much, much more.

His world changed, right there.

It was as if some sort of short circuit had shut down his brain. Cool, calm Marcus Benson who did nothing without thinking it out, whose world was a series of well planned, carefully orchestrated moves, who never let himself be shifted outside his zone of complete controlâ¦

Suddenly he was no longer in control. No. He hadnât been in control since heâd met her, he thought desperately, but he was much more out of control now. His lips met his brideâs, and the electricity surging between them felt as if it could slam him into the far wall.

But only if she came, too, he thought, stunned, because there was no way he was letting her go.

Heâd put his hands on her waist to draw her close to himâjust a littleânot to pull him hard in against her. But the warmth of her body was suddenly a fierce, molten link. The fire that surged in that link between them was unbelievable. His hands felt as

though they belonged exactly where they were. They were forged into position. As if theyâd found their home.

And her mouthâ¦ His mouthâ¦

She tastedâ¦

She tasted of Peta, he thought, with the tiny part of his brain that was left available to do any analysis at all. She tasted of nothing he had ever experienced before. She was so soft and yielding, and yet there was such strength.

He could taste the woman of her. He could feel the part of her that yielded to him and yet did not. That found her home in him and yetâ¦ And yetâ¦ And yet stayed her own sweet self.

She was curving in to him and he knew she was as bewildered as he was at this feeling. This feeling he could hardly begin to analyse. He had nothing to compare it to.

Petaâ¦

It was too much. He was past thinking. He was oblivious to the small group of onlookersâto Ruby and Darrell and the city official, all looking on with bemusement. All he knew was how her lips tasted. How his heart lurched.

How the barren wasteland of his heart suddenly seemed a far-off memory.

Petaâ¦

âIâm sure youâll be very, very happy.â

The officialâs words broke in to the moment. Somehow. The man was beaming and waiting to grip Marcusâs hand, to claim the privilege of kissing the bride, of moving on to the next ceremonyâ¦

He didnât hurry them. But this kiss had lasted a long time.

Marcus moved back. A little. Not much. His hands remained on Petaâs waist. He stared at her, dazed. She gazed back and his confusion was mirrored in her eyes.

âI didnâtâ¦â

âIâm sorryâ¦â They spoke over each other and the moment somehow broke.

âThereâs no need to apologise to each other.â The official was still beaming, his hand out to take Marcusâs and there was nothing for it but to release Peta. To let the moment go. âA man need never apologise for kissing his wife, and vice versa, and you have a lifetime ahead to do just that.â He gripped Marcusâs hand

and shook while Marcus fought desperately for normality. For sanity. Then the official turned and kissed Peta, breaking the contact even more. Giving Marcus room.

Letting reality in.

Then, the formalities over, the official stepped back and smiled some more. âThere. All done. Iâm sorry for the interruption to the ceremony but it doesnât seem to have spoiled the moment. Congratulations.â He glanced at his watchâsurreptitiously, but it was a message for all that. âThereâs some papers for you both to sign in the outer office, but thatâs it. Congratulations, Mr and Mrs Benson. Welcome to your new life.â

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The world took over. Of course it did.

Over the next hour Marcus moved on automatic pilot. He signed the register. He accepted congratulations. He faced the press. He shielded his bride as best he could and he smiled. He ate a mealâheaven knew what it wasâin the restaurant Ruby had booked to celebrate the occasion. He listened to Darrellâs shy speech and he smiled.

He smiled.

By his side, Peta smiled as well, and her smile seemed just as forced as his.

Finally the formalities were over. âDarrell and I will take a cab home,â Ruby told her boss. She reached into her handbag and hauled out a pouch. âThese are your air tickets, your passport and all the documentation youâll need for the next few weeks. Your plane leaves tomorrow morning at nine a.m.â

âMine goes tomorrow night.â Peta had chatted during the meal but sheâd sounded strained and the strain was still evident in her voice.

âWe took the liberty of changing your flights,â Ruby told her. âYou had a small taste of publicity today. With the short notice, the press contingent was limited. But Marcusâs wedding is going to hit the headlines tomorrow morning, and youâll hardly want to be around for the fuss. The society tabloids have been trying to matchmake for Marcus since he made his first million.â

âAnd now heâs hooked.â Darrellâs smile matched Rubyâs. âThatâs great.â

But it wasnât great. âI didnât hook anyone.â Peta glowered.

âHe climbed on the line all by himself.â

âAnd he can climb off again in two weeks,â Ruby told her. She gathered her handbag and looked to Darrell. âShall we leave these twoâfishermen?âtogether?â

âSounds good to me.â Darrell grinned. He took Marcusâs hand and shookâhardâand then he grasped Petaâs hands and pulled her in for a kiss to both cheeks.

âYou keep wiggling that hook,â he said gently. âMarcus is the best mate in the world and he needs you more than he knows. So wiggle until heâs firmly caught. All the love in the world to you both.â

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Then they were alone. The restaurant had alcoves that were separate rooms, giving absolute privacy. Ruby and Darrell had disappeared and Marcus was left with his bride.

The sensation wasâ¦unbelievable.

If only she wasnât so lovely, he thought, a little bit desperately. Or a lot desperately. If only she wasnât so vulnerable. So helpless. Soâ

âI need to get this gear off. I feel like something thatâs climbed off the top of a cake.â

Maybe vulnerable wasnât the right word. Maybe vulnerable was a faÃ§ade that went with the dress.

And she was right. This was silly. They needed to get back to normal. Remove the traces of bridal. But Marcus was aware of a faint tinge of regret in her voiceâmaybe because it struck an exact chord with what he was feeling. They were moving back into the real world and it hurt.

Maybe he could delay things.

âEven Cinderella had until midnight,â he told her. âWould you like to extend the fairytale?â

She stilled. âTo do what?â

âYouâre leaving New York tomorrow,â he told her. âYou havenât ridden around Central Park. Would you like to?â

She stared at him as if heâd lost his mind. Then she grinned and gestured to her dress. âIn this?â

âThe best fairytales end in full glamour,â he said cautiously, still unsure of what he was doing. âDo you trust me?â

âI donât trust anyone offering fairytales,â she told him but the smile that went with her words was suddenly almost cheeky. âPrince Charming always seemed a bit of a pansy to me.â

And suddenly he found he could smile, too. Properly. He could drop the mask of indifference. She was asking nothing of him in the long term. She wouldnât cling. He could stay with her and then walk away, his good deed done for life.

âIf I promise not to be a pansyâ¦â

âI doubt if you could be a pansy if you tried.â

âGee, thanks.â

âDonât mention it.â

âSo what about it? Do you want to have fun?â

Fun. The word hung between them. He stared down at her and he knew instinctively that the word was as foreign to Peta as it was to him.

Fun. Ha! But she was looking up at him and her head was cocked as if listening to an echo that was so far away she could hardly hear.

âYou want us to have fun?â

Did he? What was he getting himself into? he wondered wildly. If only she wasnât wearing that dress.

But she was and there was no choice.

âYes,â he told her. âYes, I do. I want us to forget all about the Benson financial empire and the OâShannassy farm and the likes of cousin Charles. For this afternoon youâre wearing a fairytale dress and Iâve never been married in my life. Can we wave our wand and make it last a bit longer?â

And then a decisionâand that smile that could heat places in a manâs heart that he hadnât known existed.

âOkay.â His beautiful bride tucked her hand confidingly in his arm and held. Claiming the proprietorship that heâd claimed when heâd given her his name.

âOkay, Mr Benson,â she told him. âFor this afternoon Iâll stick with the fairytale. Me and my non-pansy Prince Charming. You and your lopsided Cinderella with the fat foot. Imperfect but game. Letâs take ourselves out into New York and have fun.â

CHAPTER SIX

He took her to Central Park.

Robert dropped them at the Grand Army Plaza as a carriage drew up, a magnificent horse-drawn coach with wonderful greys snorting in their traces. The driver raised his hand in salute to the bridal couple and Marcus beckoned the man closer.

âYou looking for a fare?â

The man beamed. âDo you and your lady want a ride?â

âWe surely do.â

âHow far?â

âWeâd like to see the whole of Central Parkâas long as it takes.â

âWell now.â The driver grinned some more and scratched his head. A crowd was gathering, taking in the sight of this lovely bridal couple.

âWell now,â the driver said again. âStep aboard.â He turned to his horses. âCome on, boys. Letâs give these folks an afternoon to remember. And, seeing as theyâre just married, we might even give them a rate!â

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For Peta the next few hours passed in a whirl. Sheâd been transported into a make-believe world where anything was possible. Where she was beautiful, desirable, loved. Where the sheer slog of daily grind was replaced by magical clothes, a matched pair of greys, the sights of Central Park, people waving at the bridal pair. The sightsâ¦

They climbed down occasionally so Marcus could show her things he enjoyed. When her ankle held her back he simply lifted and carried her, to the delight of the bystanders and ignoring her indignant squeaks. She stood on the mosaic that said *Imagine* while a hundred tourists took photographs. She checked the animals in the childrenâs zoo and more cameras clicked. She stood on the little bridges and the rocks in the Rambles and Marcus laughed and said why didnât he have shares in digital cameras?

And then he grinned and remembered that he did.

Through all, their patient coachman waited, smiling benignly. Theyâd told Robert to leave them for two hours but it was almost three before Marcus was sure his bride had had her fill. Marcus phoned Robert and told him not to wait. At the end he had their coachman drop them off near a little place he knewâ¦

The little place was a restaurant with food to die for. Still in their wedding regalia, they were ushered to the best table in the house. Peta drank wine and ate food that sheâd never imagined existed.

She was tired, but wonderfully so. She hardly spoke. All afternoon sheâd hardly spoken. She simply soaked it in, as if this was happening to someone else. Not to her.

This couldnât possibly be happening to her.

But it was. She ate her food, dazed, while Marcus watched her with a tiny smile playing at the corners of his mouth. He was playing fantasy, too, she decided and she could hardly object.

She didnât want to object.

And then, as the waiter poured coffee and she thought this surely must end, a four-piece band started up. Soft music. Simple. Lovely. And Marcus was rising, still with that queer half smile, quizzing her with his eyes. He knew her secret. He was sharing this make-believe.

âWould you like to dance?â

Would she like to dance? The prospect was almost overwhelming. Would she?

âI donâtâ¦ I canâtâ¦ My ankle.â

âTrust me,â he said. âYou can. Iâll take your weight. Lean on me. Tonight we can do anything.â

She rose. There was nothing else for it. Her lovely skirts swished against the floor, swirling around her. Marcus pulled her into his arms, lifting the weight from her ankle so she could hardly feel it. The band took one look at this lone couple on the dance floor and struck up the bridal waltz.

It needed only that. Peta choked on laughter and buried her face in Marcusâs shoulder.

âLaughter?â He swung her expertly around the dance floor and somehow her feet followed. As if they knew the way all by themselves. Peta, whoâd never had the time or the opportunity to be on a dance floor before this night, seemed to know how

without any teaching.

Of course she did. On this night anything was possible.

âWeâre such frauds,â she whispered into his shoulder and she felt him stiffen. Just a little. And then she felt him chuckle in return, a low, lovely rumble.

âAs long as we both know it.â

âWhat time does Robert turn into a mouse?â

He looked startled at thatâbut he caught the analogy and grinned.

âHeâs fine until at least midnight. But can I just ask if youâll leave a forwarding address if you do any casting of slippers.â

âMy address is Rosella Farm, Yooralaa, Australia.â She smiled. âJust so you donât have to do any unnecessary fitting. Thereâs a lot of women between Yooralaa and New York to be trying on glass slippers on all of them.â

âAnd maybe the fairytale wouldnât hold. Maybe someone would have a smaller foot.â

She stilled and looked down to where her right foot peeked out from under her dress. Her ankle was bandaged. The bridal salon had solved her problem by giving her a right sandal three sizes larger than the left.

âI must remember to drop the left one,â she murmured. âOtherwise Iâm doomed. Or youâre doomed. You might end up with a bride whoâs two hundred pounds.â

He grinned. âBut maybe we need to rewrite the fairytale,â he suggested. âIn fact, Iâm sure we do. We need to rein up a few more mice and order a bigger pumpkin. Because, instead of fleeing alone, you get to take your Prince Charming along. Iâm coming home with you.â

For heavenâs sake. As he swung her once more around the dance floor she thought she detected the faintest trace of satisfaction in his voice. What had she got herself into?

âHey!â She pulled back. âLetâs not get carried away here.â She focused then. Really focused, hauling the fairydust out of her head. âThis isnât real. I mean, even after midnight, after the two weeks. None of this is real.â

âNo.â But he didnât stop dancing. Another turn. He was holding her tight to take her weight, half dancing, half carrying. His head was resting on her curls. Which was sensible. Wasnât it? He had to hold her to take the weight of her injured ankle.

There was no other reason for it, though, she thought wildly. No other reason she was curved into him, her body moving as one with him.

âMaybe we should go home,â she whispered.

âHome?â

âI mean, to your apartment. I meanâ¦ You to your club.â That was the sensible thing to do. Wasnât it?

âI donât think we can do it tonight,â he told her. âWeâre married.â

âSo?â

âSo we have the society pages watching. Do we want them to know we slept apart on the night of our wedding?â

âYes!â

âIâm sure you donât mean that.â

She thought about it for a bit. Which was really hard. The way her body was feelingâ¦ All she was doing was feeling. She had no room for anything else.

âYou meanâ¦because of Charles?â

âWhat else could I mean?â

Of course. What else could he mean? Silly girl.

If only she could think straight. If only he wasnât so near.

âSoâ¦â She caught herself. âYouâre saying we need toâ¦to stay in the same place?â

âWe need to stay in the same place.â

âButâ¦â

âI have a settee in the sitting room that turns into a bed. You neednât worry.â

âIâm not worried.â It was true. It was impossible to be worried when she was feeling as she was feeling. As if she was floating.

âSoâ¦you think we should go home?â

âOne more turn around the dance floor,â she whispered and he held her closer and she felt him smile.

âHow about six?â

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The fairytale ended at the front door.

Robert brought them home. Marcus helped his bride alight from the car; she stumbled on her bad ankle and he refused to

listen to her protests. He swept her into his arms and carried her into his apartment and the door slammed behind them.

They were left alone. The lights were dim. He was standing in the hallway holding a girl in his armsâhis brideâand she was gazing up at him with eyes that were luminescent, trembling, sweetly innocent.

She was so desirable. And she was his wife! He could kiss her right nowâ¦

âCut it out,â she told him, jerking her face back from his and jiggling in his arms. âMarcus Benson, put me down. Right now.â

âI thoughtââ

âI know what you thought. I can read it in your eyes.â

âPetaâ¦â

âI knew youâd want something.â She bounced and wriggled some more and he was forced to set her down.

âI donât want anything.â

She fixed him with an old-fashioned look. âYouâre saying you donât want to take me to bed?â

There was nothing heâd like better. She read his expression and he couldnât get his face under control fast enough. âHa!â

âI didnât marry you,â he said softly, âto get you into my bed.â

âNo. You married me as a favour. But now weâre marriedâ¦â

âItâd be a bonus,â he admitted, and smiled. âYouâre saying you donât think so?â

âI donât want to go to bed with you.â

âNo?â

âNo!â

âThereâs a definite physical attractionâ¦â

âBetween man and woman,â she snapped. âAnd tom cats and lady cats. And ducks and drakes and pigs and sows. You dress up in that gorgeous suit and you treat me like you have today and of course thereâd be an attraction. But thereâs no way in the wide world Iâm going to bed with you.â

âWhy not?â

It was a reasonable question, he thought, but Peta had other ideas on what was reasonable.

âIf I fall in love with you Iâm stuffed.â

âWhy?â

âWork it out, smart boy,â she said and kicked off her bridal sandals. âCinderella had no life at all. Iâm going to bed. Do I sleep on the settee or do you?â

âYou can take the bed.â

âRight, then,â she told him and walked into the bedroom with scarcely a limp. And closed the door behind her. Leaving himâ¦flabbergasted.

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What followed was a night of no sleep.

How could she sleep? Peta lay in Marcusâs too-big bed and watched the moonlight play over her bridal gown, which was draped carefully over the bedside chair. The dress seemed to shimmer in the moonlight, as if it had a life of its own.

A bridal gown. Sheâd had a wedding.

Thereâd be photographs, she thought. Thereâd been so many cameras pointed at her this day. Maybe one day years from now sheâd leaf through an ancient magazine and see this picture.

The picture of a fairytale. With Marcus. Her Prince Charming.

Did Prince Charming milk cows?

Maybe not. In fact, heâd made that a condition of marriage. The thought made her chuckle. She should sleep, she thought. Tomorrow was another huge day.

But Marcus was just through the wall. And heâd wanted to take her to his bed. It had been so hard to bounce herself out of the fantasy, she thought, and wondered how sheâd ever done it.

He married me, she told herself. Iâm his wife.

What, so youâd go to bed with him to repay the debt?

No, butâ¦

Youâd go to bed with him because he makes your toes curl. She winced and wriggled her toes, making them uncurl in the dark.

Itâd be a disaster, she told the other part of her brainâthe part that was screaming at her to swallow her principles, forget her sensible self andâ¦and do what good girls didnât do. Weâre worlds apart. You owe him a lot but you donât owe him your heart.

I have his bed, she told the dark. His bed and his name, without the man. Best of both worlds.

Maybe having a man in her bed would be no bad thing.

Maybe having Marcusâ¦

Go home, Peta, she told herself. Get yourself back to your dogs if you want company. Settle for reality.

Reality was good, she told herself. Reality was her future.

But for nowâ¦ She lay in the moonlight and looked at her wedding dress. And thought about Marcus.

Reality seemed a long way away.

Â

He wanted the fantasy.

Marcus lay in the dark and stared up at the ceiling. It was flat. Uninteresting. Boring.

He was flat, uninteresting, boring.

Today had been so different. Today heâd felt transformed. As if life somehow could be something of worth.

Stupid thought.

He lay back on his pillows and made himself remember all those weddings heâd been to as a child. His mother, starry-eyed in white, promising him the world.

âThis time heâs going to take us away from all this. Weâre starting on a new life, Marcus,â sheâd said, over and over again.

Yeah, right. Pure fantasy. Each time, the new life had begun before the wedding cake was finished and it had been invariably bleak and dreadful.

So here he was, caught up in the same fantasy his mother had used to make life bearable. White weddings. The fairytale.

It was just as well Peta had sense for the both of them, he told himself. Otherwise heâd have her in his arms right now!

Which was a truly crazy thought. To marry her was fine. But to make love to her as his wifeâ¦ No!

How on earth had he ever become caught up in this? A wife? Australia? The immediate future seemed ridiculous. Heâd been caught by a pair of twinkling green eyes, hauled in as surely as his mother had, sucked in by promises.

But it had been Marcus whoâd made the promises.

âAnd Iâm surely not dreaming of any happy ever after,â he told the ceiling. âMy lifeâs here.â

Alone with a ceiling?

Whatever.

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Heâd upgraded her ticket.

Peta wriggled down into the cocoon of her first-class seat-cum-bed and tried really hard to think indignant thoughts. How had he found out her flight was economy? How had he managed to change it, and what right did he have to do so?

But her knees werenât under her chin. She was nestled into a full-length bed. There were fluffy blankets tucking her in, soft pillows under her head, soft music playing on her personal entertainment system.

She was on her way back to reality. Back to cows and hard grind. Maybe she could indulge in a little fantasy for now, she thought. And that was exactly what she was doing. Especially as her husbandâher husband!âwas lying right beside her. If she just reached outâ¦

She didnât want to reach out. Of course she didnât. Peta OâShannassy had a very tight grip on reality.

Sort of.

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He could have used his own jet. But: âYou know how she reacted with the clothes,â Ruby had told him. âSheâll react exactly the same to a private jet.â

âShe agreed to your plans for a wedding dress.â

âThat was fantasy. A private jet, in Petaâs eyes, would be ridiculous.â

âBut hellâsitting round airportsâ¦â

âJoin the human race.â

âIâve been part of the human race,â Marcus had said grimly. âIâve moved on.â

âWell, pretend for two weeks,â Ruby had said bluntly, so here he was, on a commercial flight with the prospect of a five-hour stopover in Tokyo.

It was comfortable enough.

Who was he kidding? He was really comfortable. And Petaâs round-eyed astonishment had been a delight, even if he did have the feeling she was controlling indignation at his perceived waste of money.

Peta. His bride.

Fantasyâ¦ Reality.
The lines were becoming more blurred by the minute.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE moment she landed she transformed.

For the last few hours of the flight Peta had withdrawn into herself. Finally, at the announcement to fasten seatbelts for landing, she turned to Marcus, her face resolute.

âThank you very much,â she told him. âYou can stop pretending now.â

âStop pretending?â

âI meanâ¦â She flushed a little but her face became more resolute. âThe whole wedding thing. Letting me travel with you first class. Buying me clothes. Treating me as your wife. Itâs been great but you donât need to do it any more. No one here cares.â

âI beg your pardon?â

She smiled at that but it was an uncomfortable little smile.

âIâm sorry. Maybe I put that really badly. Itâs justâ¦ Well, hardly anyone here will have heard of you, and they surely wonât be fussed whether weâre married or not.â

âYou meanâ¦ Are you telling me to go away?â

âYou really think that Charles will check that weâre together?â

âCharles will check.â

âHow can he?â

âPrivate investigators are relatively cheap when thereâs a lot of money at stake.â

âHe wouldnât.â

âHe would.â

She thought about it and then nodded, her face decisive. âOkay. Maybe youâre right. But no one can come further than our farm gate without the dogs barking their heads off. You can have Hattieâs house. My aunt lived separately from us but her house is on the farm, too.â

He thought about it. âYou donât want me to stay with you?â

âI donât have a guest bedroom.â

âYou have four brothers.â

âSo?â

âSo, if three of them arenât living at home, why isnât there a

spare bedroom?â

She paused. She opened her mouth to speak but then appeared to think better of it. And then she smiled.

âYou can have Hattieâs house,â she told him again. âLetâs leave everything else for now. I wonder whoâs going to meet us? â

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Everybody met them. The plane touched down in Melbourne; they walked through the doors from Customs and Peta disappeared in the midst of a mÃªlÃ©e of large, male redheads. Marcus saw Petaâs brothers as a group, their family likeness unmistakeable as they leaned forward over the barrier in their eagerness to see their sister, and then Peta was through and they merged. Peta was enfolded into a group hug, and the hug went on for so long he thought heâd lost her.

But finally she was released. Tousled and laughing, she gazed at them all with affection. Four boys, three of whom were well over six feet, and the fourth a smaller, freckled one with the promise of at least a foot of growth to come.

âIâve missed you all so much,â she told them. âCome and meet Marcus.â

The oldest broke away from the group at that. Lean and gangly, just out of adolescence, the boyâs smile died and his face grew serious. Red-headed, freckled like his brothers and all of about twenty, the kid had the same look on his face as the one Peta had worn when Marcus first met her. Defiance, and a vulnerability he was trying to hide. He stepped forward and took Marcusâ hand in a grip that was surprisingly strong for one so young.

âIâm Daniel,â he said simply. âPeta rang. She told us what youâd done for us. Weâre all so grateful.â

And Marcus, man of the world, world-weary and sophisticated, found himself almost blushing. For heavenâs sake. The gratitude of a striplingâ¦

The gratitude of them all. They were all looking at him as if he was their very own personal genie. Peta was smiling, andâ¦

And heck. Enough was enough.

âI only married your sister,â he growled. âThatâs hardly a

huge sacrifice on my part.â

Daniel managed a shy grin. âI donât know about that, sir. Sheâs very bossy.â

âHey!â Peta said.

âSheâs messy, too,â the littlest one volunteered. âAnd she canât cook for nuts.â

âSheâs pretty good at animal obstetrics, though,â the second oneâChristopher?âvolunteered. âDanielâs doing vet science but he still reckons thereâs no one heâd rather have around during a messy birth than Peta.â

âMeet my brothers,â Peta said faintly. âDaniel, Christopher, William and Harry. Itâs just as well you didnât meet them before taking the matrimonial plunge, hey? A list of all my faults and virtuesâincluding delivering cows. Good grief!â She reached out and grabbed the littlest again, hugging him close. âDid you miss me?â

âYeah.â Harry sounded embarrassed but he let himself be hugged and even managed a swift hug back before masculine pride tugged him backward. âCan we go home now?â

âHey, how grateful is that?â Daniel demanded. âHarryâs been really well looked after in university college.â

âYou werenât found out?â

âEveryone knew he was there,â Daniel told her. âEven the masters. But they didnât say a word.â

âI was really good,â Harry said with virtue. âI was so good Iâm good up to my neck. Peta, Iâm really glad youâre home.â

âSo you can be bad again?â

âYep,â he said and everyone laughed.

But the laughter was a little strained. Marcus was aware that he was being carefully appraised and the sensation was definitely unnerving.

âI donât suppose you guys have any free time to come back to the farm?â Peta asked, and had three head shakes.

âItâs end of term,â Daniel told her. âExams. In three weeks weâll all be home to do the hay. Unless you need us.â He cast a sideways glance at Marcus and his message was unmistakeable. Unless you need help with this strange guy youâve brought home. Unless heâs not really the benefactor heâs supposed to be. âBut meanwhileâ¦â He glanced at his watch. âIâve got lectures

this afternoon and so have the others. Can we leave the brat with you?â

The brat. Peta had her arm around Harryâs shoulders and the three older boys were looking at him with expressions that said not one of them thought he was a brat. This family exuded affection, Marcus thought, and the sensation was soâ¦well, warm that it made his gut twist in a sudden surge of longing. But that wasnât what he was here for. He was involved enough with Peta. He had no intention of becoming more involved with her family.

âI brought your truck into the car park,â Daniel was telling his sister. âBut you canât all drive home in it. You wonât fit.â

âI assume Marcus will hire a car. I doubt heâll want to be stuck on the farm at my beck and call.â

âIsnât that what marriage is all about?â William asked.

âWilliamâ¦â Petaâs tone was warning but the kid was grinning.

âHey, what would we know?â he asked, spreading his hands. âBut you guys have been marriedâwhatâtwo days? You must be old hands by now. Becking and calling all over the place.â

There was general laughter. It was still strainedâthis was a situation that must surely lend itself to awkwardnessâbut they were nice kids, Marcus thought.

They were a nice family. Of course. How could they not be when Peta wasâ¦

No. He needed to stick with practicalities here. A car. He glanced down at his travel documents and, sure enough, there was a docket for car hire. Butâ¦

âMaybe this isnât big enough for all of us, either,â he told them. âItâs a sports car from a specialist firm. Ruby knows what I like.â

âWhat sort of sports car?â Harry demanded, releasing his sisterâs hand in an instant.

âA Morgan 4/4.â

âA Morgan?â Harryâs eyes practically popped out on stalks. âYouâve hired a Morgan 4/4? Peta, youâve married a guy who hires *Morgans*?â

âPretty cool, hey?â Petaâs eyes twinkled at the bemused Marcus, and the strain eased. âI guess that settles that. Can we have a quick meal with you guys here to catch up with news? Then weâll go. Iâll drive the truck and Marcus and Harry can

follow behind in theâ¦what did you say? The Morgan. Right. Letâs move.â

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Which was why an hour later Marcus found himself travelling south along the New South Wales coast road, not with his fantasy brideâhis Cinderellaâbut with a scrubby schoolboy who asked questions at a mile a minute and who was clearly entranced by this new personage his sister had brought home specifically for his enjoyment.

The farther south he and Harry drove, the more disconcerted he grew. Harry appeared to have accepted Petaâs explanation of this marriage as a great piece of good fortuneâthat good fortune appeared to have been capped off by Marcusâs taste in gorgeous blue Morgansâand Harry enveloped Marcus as if heâd been courting Peta for years. The little boy seemed totally, gloriously happy.

âItâs not just because of the Morgan,â he told Marcus. âItâs because Iâm going home. Youâll love it.â

Â

He was more and more out of his ken.

By the time Marcus arrived heâd driven through some of the loveliest country in the worldâwith a schoolboy by his side chattering thirteen to the dozen. He didnât have a clue what he was letting himself in for.

Peta had reached the farm before them. When he pulled to a stop she was crouched on the veranda steps of a dilapidated cottage, surrounded by a gaggle of misbegotten dogs. The dogs came barking furiously down the steps to the car and Peta followed.

She was still limping, Marcus noticed. She was still the Peta heâd left two hours ago. She was wearing the clothes sheâd worn on the aeroplaneâthe skirt and top theyâd bought in New York to face Charles.

But she looked indefinably different. The haunted air had gone, he thought. She was smiling and there was something about that smileâ¦

It was happiness. Her smile was a glow from inside,

impossible to turn off. And why? Because sheâd just arrived back at this godforsaken placeâ¦

No. That wasnât fair, he decided. The country was beautiful. Charles had fought for this place and for good reason. The farm land was softly undulating coastline, dotted by magnificent eucalypts and backed by mountains. In the afternoon sun it looked magic.

But not so the house. The veranda looked as if itâd topple at any minute, and the house attached to it was worse.

âWelcome to Rosella Farm,â Peta was saying through dog barks. âDown. Down, guys.â But there was no way the dogs were obeying. They were almost turning inside out as they realised it was Harry in the car. Harry did a mighty leap, and dogs and kid ended up rolling joyously in the dust.

But Marcus was still staring at the tumbledown house. âIs this really your home?â

âYes.â Petaâs smile faded a little. âBut donât worry. Aunt Hattieâs house is better. Itâs a couple of hundred yards further on, behind the dairy. Iâll take you there now.â

âRight.â He climbed out of the car, looked around him and made a decision. He needed to ground himself here. This was unfamiliar territory and Marcus dealt in facts. Knowledge was power. Or, at least, knowledge was being just a little less disoriented than he was feeling right now. âI need a guided tour,â he told her.

Was it his imagination, or did she back off a bit? âHarry can show you over the farm after school tomorrow.â

Harryâs cheerful face emerged from his pile of assorted dogs. âSure. But itâll take ages. Iâll stay home from school tomorrow and show Marcus everything. Youâll need me to entertain Marcus. Girls never know what to do with guys.â

His grin was infectious but Peta was obviously immune. But at least she could look at Harry now instead of Marcus. He was right. She had backed off. âNot likely,â she told her brother. âYouâve missed enough school already. But you can take Marcus down to Hattieâs now.â

Thus he was summarily dismissed. Marcus frowned. It was a neat plan. Harry could take him to her auntâs house and therefore let her get on with her life.

So? That was what he wanted, wasnât it?

Maybe not.

âIâll bring your bag in first,â Marcus told her. Heâd taken their combined luggage.

Peta shook her head and held out her hand for the bag heâd pulled out of the car. âIâll take it.â

âYour ankleâ¦â

âIs fine. Leave it here.â

âDonât you want me to see your house?â

âThereâs nothing to see.â

âYou donât want me to carry it to your room?â

âPeta sleeps on the veranda,â Harry volunteered. âOut the back, out of the wind.â He pushed the dogs aside, rose and turned to playing host. âThereâs only one bedroom and Peta makes me sleep in that.â

âPeta sleeps on the veranda?â

âItâsâ¦cool,â Peta said.

âI bet it is,â he said, stunned. âIn winter I bet itâs really cool. You sleep out all year round?â

âWe all had to sleep on the veranda until Dad died,â Harry told him. âUs boys had a really big bed, and Peta had a littler one at the other end. When Dad died the big ones made William and me move inside so I can hardly remember. But I think I liked it.â

âItâs unbelievable.â

âItâs none of your business,â Peta told him. Her face shut him out as best she could as she attempted to move on. âBut if youâre thinking Harry wasnât looked after, he was. When he was a baby he slept with me. Nowâ¦ Thereâs basic groceries at Hattieâs. Thereâs food in the freezer and long-life milk and juice in the pantry. Iâll go shopping tomorrow for whatever else you need. But meanwhileâ¦â

âWhat are we eating for dinner?â Marcus asked.

We.

The âweâ hung in the air, halting conversation. It was a push in the direction of sharing.

Was that wise? Probably not, Marcus thought, but the idea of calmly driving to another house and foraging in the freezer alone was really unappealing.

âWeâll be eating sausages,â Harry volunteered. âPeta always cooks sausages. She burns them, too.â

âWill there be sausages in myâ¦in Hattieâs freezer?â

âSure,â Harry said expansively. âPeta buys millions of sausages.â

âOkay.â Marcus smiled down into his brideâs confused face. âThen Iâm cooking. Dinnerâs on at my place. In, say, an hour?â

âYou donât even know whatâs there,â Peta said faintly.

âHow far away are the shops?â

âFifteen minutes by car.â

âNo worries, then. Jobâs done.â

âYou canât cook!â

âWho said I canât cook?â

âCan you really?â Harry demanded, suspicion and hope warring on his adolescent face. âReally?â

âReally.â

âNot stuff likeâ¦sushi.â

Marcus grinned. âI doubt even *my* ability to whip up sushi given a core ingredient of sausage.â

âAce,â said Harry, deeply satisfied. âIsnât it ace, Peta?â

Her face said it was anything but ace. âI need to milk the cows.â

âWhat, tonight?â

âIâm not paying anyone to milk tonight. If I donât milk thereâs no income.â

âCan I help?â

âI like milking alone,â she said stolidly. âYou concentrate on your sausages.â

âYour ankleâ¦â

âIs fine. Youâve done enough,â she told him. âI donât want you to help.â

The joy had faded. It was still there, he thought, but there was discomfort, too. As though sheâd realised that the joy had to be paid for.

And the price wasâ¦him.

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The second farmhouse was like a dollâs house. In much better condition than the first, it had obviously been built for one very

fussy woman.

It was pink. Very pink. The outside was a demure brick but the moment Marcus walked inside he was assaulted by pinkness. Pink walls, pink paintings, pink doiliesâ¦

âAuntie Hattie liked pink,â Harry said by his side. Peta had abandoned them, leaving Harry to do the honours.

âI can see that she did,â Marcus said cautiously and then he looked down at Harryâs bland face. âItâs horrible.â

âIt is,â Harry said, blandness making way for mischief. âOur place is better, even if itâs falling down.â

âI donât understand.â Marcus stared around him. âHow come this place is so much better than yours?â

âBetter?â

âWell, if you ignore the pinkâ¦â

âOh, you mean money,â Harry said with just a trace of scorn. âAunt Hattie always had more than us.â

âCan you tell me why?â

âEasy. My grandpa was fair.â

âFair?â

And Harry was off, all too ready to tell a story of an injustice he obviously felt strongly about. âMy grandpa had two kids, my Dad and Auntie Hattie. Auntie Hattie had a baby when she was a teenagerâthat was Charlesâbut she stayed living here. Grandpa built her this little house. My Dad married my Mum and had five kids. When Grandpa died, he left the farm half to Dad and half to Hattie, even though our family did all the work. Peta says Dad was really angry. She says thatâs another reason why Dad hated women.â

âSoâ¦â

âSo all the income from the farm had to be split into two. Half to Hattie and half to us.â

âWho works the farm?â

âPeta, mostly. We help.â

âDid Hattie help?â

âHattie never worked.â Harry gazed around the little house and grimaced. âExcept to paint things.â

âThat seems unfair on Peta,â Marcus said thoughtfully and Harry nodded.

âYeah, it is, really unfair, but Charles always said we had a

choiceâdo it like that or we could leave the farm. My Dad never wanted to leave the farmâhe couldnât be bothered and as long as there was enough money for his drinkâ¦â He bit his lip at that, and suddenly looked very young. âI guess I shouldnât have told you about Dad drinking. Itâs what Daniel told me. But Peta would growl.â

âI wonât tell her.â Marcus frowned. âSoâ¦ Peta stayed and worked the farm. Why did your brothers leave?â

âPeta made them.â

âWhy?â

âShe said there was never going to be enough money for us all to be farmers and they were going to have careers if she had to drive them off with sticks.â His grin returned. âWhen Peta gets bossy no one can argue with her.â

âI guess youâre right at that.â

âAre you really going to make sausages?â

âNot if I can help it. Whereâs the freezer?â

âIâll show you. Hattie used to go to the city sometimes and buy gourmet stuff. There might be something interesting. Butâ¦not too interesting.â

âLetâs go look,â Marcus told him. âCan you cook?â

âNo!â Harry told him, startled.

âThen youâre about to learn.â

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By the time Peta came in from the dairy she was tired. Good tired, she thought though, as she showered. Great tired. The cowsâher girlsâwere all fit and healthy. Theyâd swivelled their great bovine heads as sheâd appeared at the gate to lead them up to the dairy; thereâd been gentle moos and, moving among them, she felt sheâd come home.

Home.

No one could take it from her, sheâd thought over and over as sheâd washed teats, adjusted cups, released one cow after the other and given each an affectionate pat as they ambled off towards an evening of grazing the lush pasture on the cliffs around the house. Home. At long last the threats to her securityâher father and her cousinâwere gone.

Marcus had given this to her. It was a huge gift. Vast.

She stared down at the plain band of gold on her finger.

Marcus had insisted they each wear one for a yearâ€Letâs do this right.â

Heâd done it right.

And sheâd sent him off to Aunt Hattieâs.

Maybe heâll like pink, she told herself, and grinned to herself as the cool water streamed over her. And at least heâll be comfortable.

And heâd be away. Separate. Life could get back to normal. From this dayâ¦

âPeta?â Harry was yelling for her and she poked her head out of the shower.

âMmm?â

âMarcus and me have made dinner. Itâs ace. You gotta hurry before it gets cold. Marcus says hurry.â

He waited for her, jigging up and down with impatience as she hauled on clean jeans and a T-shirt. âCome on. Come on.â

So much for eating toast on the veranda and getting her head together. âDidnât you want to have dinner just with me tonight? â she asked.

âAre you kidding?â Harry demanded, amazed. âMarcus is ace.â

âYeah, butâ¦â

âAnd you should see what weâve cooked.â

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Curry.

Peta walked in the back door of Aunt Hattieâs little house and stopped in astonishment. Curry! Sheâd never smelled such a thing in this house. Itâd take three cans of air-freshener for Hattie to lose it. Hattie would never tolerate it.

Then Marcus appeared in the doorway and she stopped thinking about Aunt Hattie.

Sheâd never seen him like this.

The first time sheâd met him, Marcus had been dressed formally. Heâd been wearing a business suit. For the wedding heâd gone even more formal, and heâd worn a suit on the way out here on the plane. Heâd looked an experienced business traveller and Peta had been vaguely self-conscious beside him.

No. Peta had been *incredibly* self-conscious beside him.

But nowâ¦ Heâd changed. Transformed. He was wearing jeans that were almost as faded as hers, with a plain T-shirt that stretched tight across his chest and showed the muscles rippling down his arms. His deep black hair was tousled as if heâd run his fingers through it often and often. There was a smudge of something orange on his cheek.

He was wearing a pinny.

It was one of Aunt Hattieâs pinnies, she thought. Pink. Frilly. With a bow attached.

She stared. Sheâd come prepared to be stiff and formal and politeâwelcoming to a guest but here to have a fast meal and then say a formal good night and get away.

Stiff, formal and polite didnât get a look in. One glance and she was lost. Laughter bubbled up and exploded.

âWhat?â he demanded, mock offended as she whooped. âWhat? Donât you like my apron?â

âItâsâ¦â She fought gamely for control but lost. Another whoop or two and then she tried again. âItâs a very nice pinny. Did you tie the bow?â

âI tied it for him,â Harry said behind her. âHe had his hands all covered in yuck stuff and said âfind an apronâ and thatâs all Auntie Hattie had.â

âItâs a very nice apron,â she managed. âItâs a very nice bow. Wellâ¦well done, boys.â She fought a bit more for control. âUmâ¦ Is that curry I can smell?â

âIt is.â Marcus beamed at her as if a protÃ©gÃ©e had just proven herself incredibly clever. âHarry said he liked curry.â

âHowâ¦ Did Auntie Hattie have curry powder?â She was fascinated.

âYou donât make curry out of curry powder,â he told her.

âNo?â

âNo. You really donât cook, do you, Mrs Benson.â

Mrs Bensonâ¦

The label came out unexpectedly and hung. She bit her lip and tried desperately to ignore it.

âWhen I was eight years old, I had a very sensible grade teacher,â she told him. Somehow. âMrs Canterbury was Yooralaaâs answer to Emily Pankhurst. One day she took us girls aside and said if we were ever to amount to anything we should

never learn to type, never learn to sew and never learn to cook. I followed her advice to the letter.â

âWell done, you,â he said faintly, obviously bemused. âAnd here you are, amounting to lots. But hungry. Curry powder, huh? â

âSo how do you make curry without curry powder?â

âYou take the little bottles of herbs Hattie has in a collection labelled Gourmet Delight. It looks as if it was bought for decoration rather than use but she has everything. Coriander, cumin, turmeric, cardamom, you name it. Nothingâs ever been opened so itâs still good. Then you lift the cute little ornamental chilli plant off the veranda where itâs obviously been placed because it clashes with pink. You pick two chillis. You take a hunk of frozen lamb, a can of tomatoes, a few lemons from the tree outside, and *voilÃ* .â

â*VoilÃ* ? Is that Indian for delicious?â

âOf course itâs Indian. And absolutely itâs for delicious. Hungry?â

Was she hungry? She smelled again and the smell did things to her insides she found extraordinary.

No. It wasnât just the smell, she thought. It was the whole experience.

A man in Hattieâs house.

A man in her life!

There were enough men in her life, she told herself desperately. She had four brothers whom she loved. Sheâd coped with a neglectful father and a violent cousin. Six men. She didnât need any more. Ever.

But Marcus was holding the chair for her to sit. No one had ever held a chair for her. Marcus was smiling at her. No one had ever smiled at herâ¦

Was she crazy? Of course people had smiled at her. All the time!

No one had ever smiled at her like Marcus.

She was home, she told herself. Life had to get back to normal. This was some crazy two-week aberrationâa man cooking for herâa man acting as if he cared. Itâd go away. Heâd go away and then her life could go on as normal.

Could it?

They sat across the table from him, Peta and her little brother, and they ate his curry as if theyâd never eaten such food. They savoured every mouthful.

Marcusâs cooking was his secret pleasure. His mother had never cooked. For the first few years of his life heâd lived on hamburgers and Coke. Then one of his motherâs boyfriends had wooed her by hiring a chef for the night. Marcus had been sent to bed while the two had a romantic *tÃªte Ã tÃªte*, but the smells had been tantalising. The next day the leftover ingredients filled the kitchen. Heâd investigated, then had a long discussion with the lady in the next door apartment.

The result had left him delighted. It had been the start of a skill that until now had never been shared. But sharingâ¦

It was great, he thought. His food was being consumed with total enjoyment and it added to his satisfaction tenfold. Peta and Harry discussed the curry with absolute fascination; they ate every scrap and the three dogs under the table were left to eye each other disconsolately.

âWhere did you learn to do this?â Peta demanded and he told her. That felt odd, tooâtalking about the past to a woman who looked as if she was really interested. Who looked as if she really cared.

She didnât. She couldnât, he told himself. This farm was her life and she had no part in his. He knew that, but as the last of the curry was finished and she rose to go, he was aware of a sharp stab of loss.

âIâll make coffee,â he told her but she shook her head.

âI have milking in the morning. Five a.m. I need to go to bed. And itâs back to routine for Harry. He has school.â

âAwâ¦â

âCome on, Harry.â Peta hauled Harry to his feet and whistled the dogs. âCome on, guys. We need to go home and let Mr Benson get his sleep.â

âItâs just after eight oâclock,â Marcus said, startled. âEven Prince Charming got a better look-in than that.â

âYou left Cinderella in New York,â Peta said firmly. âAnd sheâs staying there.â

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE silence was deafening.

Peta and Harry left, the dogs followed, and Marcus was left in his little pink house with his thoughts.

His thoughts werenât exactly little and pink. They were large and black. He cleaned the kitchen and polished the pink bench-tops. He unpacked, put his clothes on the pink clothes hangers, stared at the pink walls, thought about how many hours there were in two weeks and how much pink a man could stand.

Not much more than this.

He set up his laptop and logged into his work space. It was nine at night, which meant it was five in the morning in New York. No one was online.

Heâd expected a sheaf of correspondence from Ruby. There was nothing.

A man could go crazy.

Where was everyone? He stared at his cellphone. He could ring. There were plenty of things he could discuss.

Heâd wake everyone up.

They worked for him. Theyâd get over it.

Butâ¦

âHave a holiday,â Ruby had told him. âI mean it, Marcus. No work. Take two weeks. We donât want to hear from you. See if you can do it.â

Sheâd said it as a challenge and heâd reacted as if sheâd been stupid. But now, staring at his cellphone and at his idle computer, he knew Ruby wasnât stupid. Ruby knew him better than he knew himself.

Maybe because sheâd walked the same lonely road.

Tonight had been good, he thought. Tonight had beenâ¦excellent. Teaching a twelve-year-old to cook a curry.

It was more than that, he conceded. His pleasure had come from watching a twelve-year-old enjoy himself. And more than that. Watching a twelve-year-oldâs big sister enjoy her little brotherâs pleasure. Giving his Cinderella more.

Tonight Peta had been happy and it had felt good. It was a strange sensation but it had felt right. Making Peta happy.

Caring.

Whoa! He caught himself and gave himself a mental swipe to the side of the head. He was getting soppy here. This whole situation was for two weeks, he told himself. Only two weeks. Two weeks, Benson, and youâre out of here.

He was going nuts.

But what the heck was a man to do? He flicked on the television and watched an inane American sitcom. What on earth was this country doing, importing this stuff? Was it funny?

How the heck would he know when he couldnât concentrate?

How had he ever got himself into this mess? he demanded of himself. The world seemed to be going to bed, but how could he go to bed? His head said it was six a.m. New York time and every single part of him was awake.

Peta had adjusted to New York time, he thought, so maybe sheâd be feeling like he was. How could Peta be calmly going home to bed?

On her veranda?

That was another thing to think about. To chew over. To make a girl sleep on the verandaâ¦

This set-up was dreadful, he thought. Appalling. She must have had the pits of a childhood. He thought of her lying in a bedâprobably with broken springsâprobably with thread-bare blanketsâsetting the alarm for the crack of dawn or earlier, so she could get up to milk her cows.

She was a real Cinderella, he decided, whether she admitted it or not. And heâ¦ Heâd volunteered to rescue her.

No, he hadnât. Offering to marry someone for two weeks out of practicality hardly turned him into Prince Charming.

There must be more he could do.

She couldnât be asleep. Not if the bedsprings were sticking into her. Andâ¦what was that fairy story about the pea? The princess sleeping on a hundred feather mattresses, yet still disturbed by one pea underneath the bottom layer.

Fairytales! He was losing his mind.

But the image refused to go away and he found himself opening the back door and staring outside. Youâre going to

rescue her from a pea?

Iâm not going anywhere.

But he was. He refused to stay one minute longer in this little pink room in this little pink house.

Heâd just wander by her veranda, he told himself. Just to make sure. And if there were any peas that needed removingâ¦

Well, maybe he was just the man to do it.

Donât do it, he told himself. Just go for a walk. And if you end up closeâ¦

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Sleep was nowhere. Peta lay and stared into the dark and tried to conjure up the pure contentment sheâd always felt in this bed. In this place.

When their father had died the boys had conducted a vote and had decreed the inside bedroom was Petaâs. Sheâd refused. For as long as she remembered sheâd lain in this little bed at the far end of the veranda while the boys lay in the bigger bed at the other end. They were not too far away, but not too near. This was her private place. Here she could haul the bedclothes up to her nose and disappear into her thoughts, while out in the wide world cows chewed their cuds, trees rustled in the wind, the sea did its thing, owls hooted, frogs croakedâ¦

This farm was alive at night and it was her company. Sheâd missed it so much while she was in New York.

She should be revelling in it now.

She should be sleeping. She should. Instead she lay and stared out into the starlit sky and all she could see was Marcus.

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Marcus did a circuit of his little house and decided to extend his tour. The moon was full. He could see the shapes of the cows in the paddocks, the shadowy trees and the mountains in the background. He could hear the soft hush-hushing of the surf below the house. He could smell the eucalypts and the salt of the sea.

All of which should make Marcus, a city boy born and bred, scurry back to his little house and close the door against the elements. Instead he found himself wandering in a wider arc

from the house. Just walking. Following the tracks made by generations of Petaâs family as they went about their business on the farm.

Getting closer to Peta?

Heâd already discovered from Harry that Peta had visited Hattieâoften. Heâd learned that Hattieâs presence had meant that the children were allowed to stay on the farm when their father died. But apparently Hattie had been a weak woman whoâd cared for Peta but hadnât been able to stand up for her against her own son.

âI canât remember much about Charles,â Harry had told him. âI was too little when he went away. But Daniel says Charles was a real creep. He hit everyone who got in his way. Auntie Hattie had to stay here when Charles was a kid because there was nowhere else to go, but Charles hated it. He hated us. Everyone was really pleased when he went away and it was awful when he came home. Dan says he just came home looking for money and he made Auntie Hattie cry. There was never enough money for him. That made Peta angry; she wouldnât let him hit Auntie Hattie so he used to hit Peta. A lot.â

The bleak little outline fitted exactly with what Marcus knew of Charles, but it made him see red just to think of the creep hitting Peta.

Of anyone hitting Peta.

Marcus had never really thought about it but, if forced, maybe he would have said heâd had an appalling childhood. But apparently there were others whoâd had appalling childhoods. More appalling childhoods than his.

So? Other people had got over it. So why couldnât he?

The image of his mother and her series of boyfriends still made him cringe, but it was more than just his childhood holding him apart from the human race, he thought. He knew what happened when he got attached to people. Dreadful things. It was so much better to stay apartâ¦

His feet kept walking. The moonlight played on his face. He wasnât in the least tired.

He walked closer. Closer to Petaâs sad little house. Closer to the veranda. Sheâd be solidly asleep, he told himself. No one would wake.

The dogs were his undoing.

They came out of nowhere, not vicious, not snapping, but ecstatic to see a human being awake. Harryâinformative Harry, whom Marcus had pumped unashamedly during curry-makingâhad told him that the dogs had stayed here while Peta was away, fed by the businesslike neighbour who did things for money. To have Peta and Harry home was obviously wonderful in the dogsâ eyes, but Peta and Harry had gone to bed, which was really boring, and here was the friend whoâd fed them scraps from his curry.

Marcusâs plan on walking unnoticed round the farm counted for nothing. As an ex-soldier he should have known better. The dogs were yapping and yelping and bounding, and then a voice called out of the night.

âTip. Bryson. Whoâs out there? Come here, boys.â

Peta. Heâd scared her, Marcus thought, dismayed. He hadnât meantâ¦

âIf thatâs you, Marcus, watch your feet for cow pats. Weâve let the cows graze in the home yard.â

Cow pats. So much for terror!

What was a man to say to that? It seemed the lady wasnât scared at all. âIâm watching,â he managed, stunned.

âGood for you,â she called and, astonishingly, there was laughter in her voice. âCome here, boys.â

She meant the dogs, he thought. Only the dogs.

âAre you in bed?â he called.

âI surely am.â This was really strange, like speaking to a disembodied head. âWhich is where you should be.â

âIâm not tired. Why arenât you asleep?â

âMaybe I would be but strange men keep wandering around in my cow pats.â

âYou donât sound as if youâre even near sleep,â he complained. âAre you saying itâs my fault youâre awake?â

âI wouldnât say that,â she said cautiously. âNot exactly.â

âWhat would you say?â

âThat Iâm really happy to be home.â

âEven if it means youâre sleeping on the veranda?â

âI like sleeping on the veranda.â

âSeriouslyâ¦â

âSeriously.â There was a momentâs hesitation and then

obviously a decision. âCome on up and see.â

âYouâre inviting me into your bedroom?â

âIâm inviting you onto my veranda. Thereâs a difference.â

âAnd the dogs get to play chaperon.â

âHey, Iâm hardly about to get swept away on a tide of girlish passion here,â she said with some asperity. âAnd if youâre thinking of indulging in the sameâ¦â

âGirlish passion?â

âThatâs the one. I have a pitcher full of cold water and Iâm prepared to use it.â

He choked. âItâs a great invitation.â

âAnd itâs only made once. Are you coming up or not?â

Was he? His feet were already moving.

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She looked about twelve years old.

Marcus reached the end of the veranda and stopped in astonishment. He wasnât sure what he had thought heâd find but it wasnât this.

Her bed was a single bed pressed hard against the far wall. So far so good. That was what heâd thought sheâd have. But heâd expected a barren little cot. What he found wereâ¦

Cushions. Pillows. Quilts. A vast mound of glorious bedclothes in semi-ordered chaos. In the dim moonlight he could scarcely make out colours but he could see enough to know that this was a mad and vibrant mix, an eclectic scattering of whatever Peta fancied. There must be a dozen huge pillows mounded up beside her, spilling over onto the floor. The oldest of the farm dogs, a greying old collie called Ted-dog, was curled up beside the bed. As Marcus approached he gave his tail a faint wag as if to say, Iâm very pleased to see you and Iâll be even more pleased if you donât expect me to get up.

Marcus could see where he was coming from. If he was curled up on a mound like thisâ¦

So much for his pea.

âItâs great, isnât it?â Peta said. She wiggled farther down under her bedclothes so only her nose emerged from the gorgeous quilts.

âI thought you were deprived,â Marcus said before he could

stop himself and she pushed the quilt down a fraction.

âDeprived?â

âAbusive father. Dead mother. Made to sleep outdoorsâ¦â

âMy dad wasnât abusive. He never liked girls but he didnât take it out on me. He simply didnât have time for me.â

âAnd your mother?â

âShe wasnât much interested, either. I have really scant memories of her. She stayed inside and had babies.â

âSomething you would never do?â

âIf I had babies I might make a push to make sure they were happy,â she told him. âOur mother really liked babies but as soon as we started being messy it was outside and get on with our lives.â She pushed herself up on her cushions and looked past him out to where the moon hung over the sea. âIt was just as well it was a great outside. How lucky were we?â

âLucky?â

âWe had this.â She put a hand down and fondled Ted-dogâs ears. âWe had the dogs. We had each other. We had a great childhood.â

âYou didnât have any money.â

âI donât see you happy,â she said softly. âBecause you have money. Where would you prefer to sleep? In that sterile, awful Manhattan apartment, or here? This is the best bedroom in the world.â

âAnd if it rains?â

âI hang plastic from the veranda rails. And if it gets really, really cold I might even let a dog or two in for company. Itâs great.â

âIâm sure.â

âYou donât sound convinced.â

âI think I like central heating.â

âTurn around,â she said. Her voice was suddenly urgent. She was sitting bolt upright now in her amazing bed. She was wearing a T-shirt, he thought. A T-shirt. How many women of his acquaintance slept in anything other than sexy negligÃ©es?

But, âLook,â she said again and he was forced to turn and look.

And he was caught.

It was lovely, he had to concede. In fact, in truth, it was

breathtakingly beautiful. The moon was casting a ribbon of silver over the sea. Below the house, the waves were breaking in long, low lines. The foam from their breaking was caught in the moonlight, a soft white pattern of hushed time.

The sand was wideâthe tide must be full out as the beach seemed to spread for miles. The house was only about two or three hundred yards from the beach. The soft breaking of wave after wave was a lullaby all by itself.

Between here and the beach stood four or five vast gums, their canopies almost another roof. There was a huddle of cows under one. Sleeping. Settled on the lush pasture for the night. He couldnât see from here but he could imagine their jaws contentedly chewing, conjuring flavours of the grasses theyâd eaten during the day.

âThis is why I married you,â Peta said softly. âNot for money.â

âNot for love?â

She turned and grinned at him. âYouâre looking for romance? â

âUmâ¦no.â

âIâve had a very nice wedding,â she told him. âThank you very much. But isnât that how the story goes? A white wedding and then the princess gets to live happily ever after?â

âWith her prince.â

âWho needs a prince? I have this. I have my dogs. I have security for the boys.â

âYouâre telling me I can go back to New York?â

âOh, no, I need you here,â she told him quite kindly. âYou said that yourself. Two weeks to make the marriage valid.â

âAnd then I can clear off?â

âThatâs what you want to doâisnât it?â

âOf course.â

âBut I did decide Iâd invite you up onto my veranda,â she told him, as if granting some huge concession. âJust once. So you can see what youâve given me.â

âSo you can point out that you donât need me after two weeks?â

âThat, too. I keep getting the feeling that you see me as some sort of charity. Well, I was,â she admitted with sudden candour.

âYouâve saved me. I just wish I could save you back.â

âSave me?â

âYou donât have a very satisfactory life,â she told him.

Good grief.

Marcus stared down at her in the moonlight. She was hugging her knees, looking at him in consideration. As if he was some sort of interesting bugâ¦

The sensation was indescribable. Heâd be less uncomfortable if the story of his life was splashed across the front page of the *New Yorker*.

âWill you cut it out?â he demanded.

âCut what out?â

âButting into whatâs none of your business.â

âIf you donât want me to,â she said, obliging. She ducked down under her covers and disappeared up to her nose again. âGood night.â

Heâd been dismissed. He should turn around and head down those rickety steps again. Butâ¦

But. It was a simple word and he couldnât get over it. But. But what? He didnât have a clue.

âArenât you suffering from jet lag?â he asked.

âJet lag? After the aeroplane bed I had? You have to be kidding.â Her voice was muffled by bedclothes, almost indistinct.

âI mean time zones,â he said, a little bit desperately. âI feel as if itâs morning.â

âI do, too, a bit,â she agreed, still muffled. âBut the cows will be awake at five oâclock. I have to get up then, so I need to sleep.â

âYou want me to go away.â

She put the sheet down a smidgeon and stared up at him, only her eyes above the sheet.

âYouâre lonely!â

âNo, Iâ¦â

âHattieâs house is creepy,â she told him. âAll that pink. I wouldnât wonder if youâre lonely.â

âAnd youâre not?â

âI do miss the boys,â she admitted. âHarry sleeps inside now. He has a computer and he reckons the cables get wet out here. So he ended up in the bedroom. But I liked it when they slept out

here.â She motioned to the other end of the veranda. âItâs a great place to sleep. If you like you could try it.â

âWhatâ¦share your veranda?â

âItâs a very long veranda.â

âDo you always ask strange menâ¦â

âYouâre not a strange man. Youâre my husband.â

Yes. Yes, he was. The thought was incredible.

âAnd if I tell the dogs to attack theyâll do just that,â she added.

Pop went his fantasy bubble. He choked. He turned to stare down at the mutts who were draped decoratively over the cushions. âI donât believe it.â

âBelieve it,â she said seriously. âDaniel did that for me the last time Charles came home.â

âDid what?â

âHe trained the dogs. Theyâre great with cattle and theyâre highly intelligent. Charlesâ¦ Well, Charles gave me a hard time one night and Daniel decided if I was to stay here alone I needed protection. So now thereâs just one word I have to say and they turn into a pack of snarling savages. Want to see?â

âNo!â

He was getting accustomed to the moonlight now and he could see her grin.

He wasnât getting accustomed to the situation, though. This woman had stood beside him two days ago and promised to be his wife. Sheâd stood for press photographers, her hand in his, his lovely bride. Sheâd slept beside him in the plane, sheâd tucked her hand in his as theyâd gone through customs, sheâd let him take control, manage things, do what he was good at.

What had he expected here?

Not this. An invitation to share her veranda with a pack of killer dogs between them.

Butâ¦

He stared out at the night. It wasâ¦perfect.

He could sleep here. He could sleep with Peta. Or he could go back to the pink puffy concoction that was Hattieâs bed, or to the horror-fantasy-poster-covered room that had been the creation of an adolescent Charles before he left home.

Three options.

âItâs a very generous offer,â Peta said cheerfully, following

his line of thought. âI donât make it to anyone. But now, if you donât mind, Iâm going to sleep.â

She turned over on to her side; the covers came right up, and her body language said that whatever he did was up to him. Sheâd made her offer and the rest was his business.

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He should go home.

Home? Who was he kidding? Home was Hattieâs pink palace.

It wasnât so different to his place in Manhattan, he thought. Both seemed suddenly indescribably bleak. He stared down at Peta for a long moment and then slowly walked the length of the veranda.

The bed was made up. It was three times the size of hers. The boys had slept in it, Peta had said. All the boys?

Maybe.

And maybe it wasnât such a bad childhood. He stared down at the mound of bedclothes and thought of four little boys tumbled among the pillows. With Peta sleeping close by.

Not so bad. Not so bad at all.

He hesitated, but not for long. He turned and stared at the mound of bedclothes that was Peta.

No choice.

He slipped off his outer clothes and slid under the bedclothes, feeling like a kid on a camping trip. And here was another surprise. There were no burst bedsprings. No thread-bare blankets. The bed enfolded him. The smells and the sounds enfolded him and one of the dogs came up and put his nose above the side of the bed, nosing a hopeful enquiry.

âLet me see. Iâm guessing you must be Tip. Youâre one of the killer pack?â

A wag of the tail and a low woof. A quiver of the backside. Hopefulness personified.

âIf you have fleas youâre out of here.â

âHe has no such thing!â It was an indignant squeak from the other end of the veranda.

âI thought you were asleep?â Then Marcus gasped as the big dog accepted the flea enquiry as a welcome and wriggled right in. Right across his chest.

âTip likes it there,â Peta said in satisfaction. âIâve never slept with a husband. Doesnât it feel odd?â

Odd? That was the understatement of the century, Marcus thought. He lay and stared outward at the stars while Peta settled again and the big dog started to snore gently beside him.

Heâd never sleep. How could he sleep?

Heâd never sleep.

He slept.

CHAPTER NINE

MARCUS BENSON hadnât slept for more than four hours straight since he was fourteen years old. He hadnât needed to. Hadnât wanted to. If he slept then he dreamed, and now it was easier to wake and log on to the worldâs financial markets and exercise his brain by making money rather than letting his thoughts dwell on the demons in his past.

Until this night.

He slept. The sun crept over the horizon. Peta rose and took herself off to the dairy. The dogs bounded off after her, jubilant at having their mistress back in her proper place, and still Marcus slept.

He woke as Harry tore round the side of the house, hauling a school bag over his shoulder while he manoeuvred a piece of toast with half his mouth.

He glanced sideways at the veranda and stopped short.

âYou!â

It was hard to say who was more surprisedâHarry or Marcus. They stared at each other. Marcus stared down at his watch. Then stared back at Harry.

âYou slept with Peta.â It wasnât an accusation. There was no aversion in Harryâs toneâjust surprise.

âI slept on this end of the veranda,â Marcus said hurriedly. âPeta slept on the other.â

âYeah, sheâd never share with us,â Harry said, taking another mouthful of toast. âWe told her it was warmer in bed with us but she preferred the dogs. Guess she preferred the dogs to you, too, huh?â

âI guess so,â Marcus said weakly. âUmâ¦ Are you off to school?â

âYeah. Yikes.â Harry looked round to where a faint cloud of dust in the distance heralded an arriving school bus. âGotta go. Whatâs for tea tonight? Something good? Ace. See ya.â And he was off in a tangle of toast, school bag and undone shoelaces.

Marcus watched him run, saw him catch the bus by the skin of his teeth, grinned, and then turned back to the enigma of his

watch.

His grin faded. How on earth had he slept so long?

No matter. He had.

From the dairy there was the gentle hum of the milking machine and the occasional moo of an indignant cow. Peta was up? Peta was working?

Before him?

The thought was almost unbelievable. So, too, was the thought that she was working and he was sleeping.

He was supposed to be rescuing her, he thought. Great Prince Charming he was. Marry the girl and send her back to her cinders.

But helping her wasnât as simple as it had seemed. Two minutes later he walked in the dairy doorâonly to have the nearest cow start back in alarm and Peta call, âStop right there.â

He stopped.

This was a different Peta yet, he thought. She was a woman at work. In faded jeans, a checked overshirt with rolled up sleeves, her hair caught back with a couple of serviceable combs and her knee-high rubber boots liberally coated with mud, she looked every inch at home in her environment.

As opposed to Marcus. The cows stared at him as if heâd landed from outer space and that was exactly how he felt.

âIâve come to help,â he told her.

âThanks, but youâll scare the cows.â

âWhy will I scare the cows?â

âTheyâre not used to seeing New York billionaires in their dairy.â

âYou didnât have to tell them I was a billionaire,â he said cautiously and she smiled.

âThey might have guessed by the shoes. Soft suede shoes donât cut it here.â

âI guess they donât.â He looked down at his footwear. âUmâ¦ Would your brothers have any rain boots I can borrow?â

âThereâs another giveaway.â She adjusted the cups on a sleek, fat cow and then rose to bring the next cow into the bail. âWeâthe cows and Iâcall them gumboots.â

âWhy?â

âBecause the cows and I are Australian.â The cow pulled back

from her and she sighed. âYeah, the boys all have gumboots you can borrow but it wonât help. Youâre making it hard for me.â

âJust by being here?â

âCows donât like strangers.â

âI have to do something,â he told her. âIf you think Iâm just going to sit round being ornamental for two weeksâ¦â

âDonât you like being ornamental?â

âIâve never really thought about it,â he admitted. âI donât think so.â

âSo you really want to work?â

Hmm. A little voice was telling him to be cautious. âI might.â

âWell, then. You could get rid of the pink.â

âPardon?â

âYou could paint Hattieâs house.â

âSo that you can live in it?â

âIâm staying on my veranda. But the boys bring friends home from university and a non-pink guest house would be nice.â She gave him her very nicest smile. âThat is, if you really do want to be useful. But Iâm happy if youâre not. You deserve to be ornamental if you feel like it.â

âIs there anything in between?â he asked, thinking it through. âSay, if I donât want to be ornamental and I donât want to paint houses.â

Her answer to that was immediate. âYou could make me breakfast.â

âYouâve decreed that Iâm cook?â

âI thought you decreed that yourself. I do a mean bowl of cornflakes and Iâm willing to share.â She glanced across at the yard to where only ten more cows patiently queued. âIâll be back at the house in half an hour.â

âFor cornflakes?â

âFor cornflakes or whatever variation you care to dream up.â

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Heâd had enough of pink. He made pancakes in Petaâs house. He felt really, really strange.

While he cooked he watched Peta through the window. He saw her finish in the dairy, sluicing it down ready for evening milking. She took herself to the outside showerâa primitive arrangement that heâd already inspected and found wantingâand

he watched as she emerged dressed the same way as sheâd been in the dairy, only cleaner.

Petaâs house had a lean-to kitchenânot a patch on Hattieâs bright beauty, but it had the huge advantage of being homely. The kitchen was obviously the place where Peta and the boys spent most of their lives. There was an ancient fire-stove, a vast wooden table, rickety chairs, battered linoleum, and windows looking out over the farmland to the beach beyond. It was a great room.

It was better when Peta walked in. Somehow.

She stopped in the doorway and sniffed in delight, and her smile lit the room.

âPancakes. Coffee. There. I knew there was a reason I married you.â

âI wish you wouldnât keep referring to our marriage as if Iâm some sort of acquired toy,â he complained and she paused from kicking off her gumboots.

âItâs the only way I can think of it,â she told him. Her eyes turned suddenly serious. âNot that youâre a toy boy. I didnât mean that. But that itâs a sort of game. I canât believe we did it. That I wore that dress. That I made those vows.â

He watched her face, and he shared her confusion. She was right. This was a far cry from white, lacy and bridal in New York. But underneath she was just the same Peta. The reason he married her still held. She needed help and she deserved it. âItâs not a game,â he told her.

âBut itâs not for real.â

âFor two weeks it has to be real.â

âWhen I think about it superficially,â she said slowly, walking into the kitchen in her socks and lifting the flipper for the pancakes, âthen itâs fine. But then all of a sudden it hits me. Wham. A complete stranger married me so I can stay here. So Harry can live here if he wants. So we can have a permanent home. Butâ¦ To marry a strangerâ¦ How on earth did it happen?â

âFantasy,â he told her. âEveryone likes a fairy story. Iâve already flipped the pancakes. Theyâre ready to eat. Sit.â

So she moved to the table and sat. He couldnât object to her reaction to the pancakesâshe ate as if she was ravenousâbut as the pile dwindled she pushed back her plate and the look of

trouble settled on her face again.

âIâm sorry I wouldnât let you help in the dairy.â

âItâs fine.â

âItâs not. I owe you so much. I should let you do whatever you want.â

âBut not sleep on your end of the veranda?â

Now where had that come from? The moment he said it he regretted it. She flinched. And then she faced him. Head on.

âDo you want to?â

Did he want to? Hell!

But as he gazed at her across the table, as he let the sensation of her flinch settle, he knew there was only one answer.

âNo, Peta,â he told her. âI donât want to. Iâm not here to take advantage of you. It was a stupid thing to say and Iâm sorry.â

âYouâd be within your rights.â

âI donât think youâve met very nice men,â he told her. âIf thatâs what you think of marriage. That it comes with automatic rights.â

She stared at him. The moment stretched on. And on.

Ridiculous.

âTell me what youâre intending to do now,â he said at last, and if his voice didnât come out as heâd intended he couldnât help it.

âYou meanâ¦marriage-wise?â

âYou already got married,â he reminded her. âWhatâs next?â

âYou mean, in life?â

âI was thinking more how you intended spending the morning,â he told her. âSort of between here and lunch. Thereâs not a lot of hatches, matches and dispatches we can fit in until then.â

âOh.â She sounded flummoxed. âYou meanâ¦like shopping?â

âIs shopping on the agenda?â

âWeâre living out of the freezer. Itâd be good to get something fresh.â

âIâm good with shopping.â

âYou want to come into town and push a supermarket trolley in Yooralaa?â Her smile, irrepressible, came flooding back. âThereâs no cans of caviar for miles.â

âPeta?â

âYes?â

âCut it out.â

She peeped him a smile. âOkay. Iâm sorry. But Iâm sure you donât want to come.â

âIâm sure I do.â

âYouââ

âPeta, I refuse to stay locked in Hattieâs house for two weeks while the world decrees our marriage is valid. Iâm coming with you.â

âBut people will thinkâ¦â

âThat weâre married? Thatâs what theyâre supposed to think.â He hesitated. âThat isâthere arenât suitors waiting in the wings whoâll be put off if they see me at your side?â

âUmâ¦no.â

âNo suitors?â

âI find suitors are an awful pest,â she told him. âThey mess up the house something awful and object to gumboots.â

âWhich is why you just cut straight to the chase and got married. Okay.â He rose and smiled down at her. She looked great, he decided. He might even enjoy walking side by side through the supermarket with her holding his trolley.

âDonât get any funny ideas,â she said and he blinked. Peta, the mind reader.

âLook, separate ends of the veranda is a concept I can deal with,â he told her. âBut separate supermarket trolleys is maybe taking independence too far.â

âYou can never have too much independence. I thought that was your motto.â

Heâd thought so, too. He stared after her as she disappeared to find some shoes respectable enough to wear to town and he thought, yeah, independence. What had happened to his ideal now?

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It was a very satisfactory dayâthe sort of day Marcus had never had in his life.

First there was the trip to the supermarket. Heâd expected that she might be embarrassed but instead she introduced him to all and sundry and he was conscious of suppressed laughter.

âHi, Mrs Michaels. This is my husband, Marcus.â

It was Marcus who was flustered.

âThey need to know youâre here,â Peta told him. âCharles knows any number of locals and Iâm sure heâll be contacting them to make sure youâre here. You donât mind, do you?â

âNo, Iâ¦â

âAfter all, you donât have to see any of these people after two weeks. Itâll be me whoâll be playing the deserted bride.â

âIâm sure youâll play a beautifully pathetic divorcee,â he managed and she chuckled.

âYouâd better believe it. How many cans of spaghetti do we want?â

âNone,â he told her. âCanned when you can have fresh?â

âSure. Iâm a canned girl.â

âIf you donât want to be a divorcee by tomorrow then you put the cans back.â

There were locals watching them. Whispering. News was spreading.

âThereâs not a lot of friendliness,â he said as they proceeded through their shopping list.

âMy dad lied and cheated and my cousin did the same,â she told him. âOur family are still pretty much outcasts.â

âEven you?â

âI learned early to keep myself to myself.â

âBut you pay your debts?â

âI donât have debts. The OâShannassy credit dried up a long time ago. I pay cash or I get nothing and thatâs the way itâs always been. Nowâ¦ Baked beans?â

âNot baked beans.â

âButâ¦â

âAnd not processed cheese, either. Honestly, woman, do you have no soul?â

âI eat to live,â she said with a certain amount of pride.

âYouâre proud of that?â

âYes.â

He shook his head. âItâs a culture thing,â he told her. âIt must be. You come from convict stock?â

âI surely do,â she told him. âI have baked beans in the

blood.â

âItâs a whole life I never knew existed,â he said faintly. âAnd Iâm not sure I want to.â

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But he did want to know.

As the day wore on, the more fascinated he became. They took their shopping home, and then Peta took him on a tour of the fences. âThey need to be checked once a week,â she told him. âThe cows damage them and if stock gets out Iâm in real trouble.â So they hiked along the fence line with Petaâs fencing tools slung over her shoulder. For the first two minutes.

âYouâre not carrying them,â she told him. âTheyâre dirty. Youâll get your nice shirt soiled.â

âPetaâ¦â He lifted the tools from her grasp. âYour ankle still hurts and youâre married, remember? Isnât the husband supposed to be hunter gatherer?â

âOnly in families when the little woman stays home and cooks. And you wouldnât let me buy baked beans.â

âSo I wouldnât,â he said, and grinned. He handed one of the six tools back. âOkay. You get to carry one spade and you get to cook cornflakes and toast. But for the rest, you have a husband. Use him.â

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They fenced. They found a cow in the bottom paddock caught up in a hedge of gorse and a gully caused by erosion. They dug her free and watched her make her way back to the herd, with nary a thankful glance. They ate sandwiches that Peta had stuck in a backpack before theyâd come out and they sat on the cliff and watched the sea. A dolphin pod appeared on cue, surfing through the breakers and cruising along the coast line. Marcus could see why Charles fought for development rights to this place. As a holiday resort itâd be fabulous.

As a farm it was better.

âIs the beach safe for swimming?â Marcus asked.

âIt sure is.â

âCan we?â

âNope. I have to milk.â

âWhat, already?â

âHarry will be home any minute. Take him swimming.â

âDoesnât anyone help you milk?â

âI like milking. I donât need help.â

âPeta, you have me. Use me.â

âNo.â

âYou needââ

âI donât need a husband in any more than name,â she interrupted, her face closed. âYou know that. Thank you for my day.â She rose and gave what seemed to him to be a regretful glance at the ocean. âStay here and rest. Iâm off to play milkmaid.â

âPeta, I want to come. Your foot must be hurting.â

âMy footâs fine. It has to be. And I told you, youâll scare the cows. Keep Harry company.â

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But Harry didnât want company. Harry had homework. âIâm way behind and thereâs a cool project I have to do on volcanoes.â

âWould you like some help?â

âNah,â Harry told him. âThanks anyway but Iâm used to doing stuff on my own.â

So was Marcus. Wasnât he? Dismissed and not enjoying the sensation as much as he might expect, Marcus made his way back to the beach.

At least here was pleasure. The water was gorgeous. He swam with the strength of a champion swimmerânot for nothing had he purchased an apartment with rights to an indoor lap poolâbut he swam alone.

He was so unsettled. What was he doing?

Nothing. He was doing nothing. He wasnât needed.

It should make him contented. Two weeks holiday with nothing to do and no demands on him.

It made himâ¦ He didnât know what. Heâd never had nothing to do in his life.

And heâd never wanted to be neededâby someone who didnât want him.

She watched him.

Peta milked her cows and all the time she was achingly aware of the man on the beach below the dairy. She could see him stroking back and forth across the bay. He looked superbly fit and at home in the surf, a far cry from the tailored New York businessman sheâd fallen for five days ago.

Fallen for?

Uh-oh. The words settled. Then they settled some more. Had she fallen for Marcus Benson?

Of course she had.

âAnd Iâve fallen hard.â

She said it out loud and the cow whose teats she was cleaning swivelled round and stared down at her. Bemused.

âDo you guys fall inappropriately in love?â she demanded and the cow kept on staring.

She stared back, and then sat back on the wet cobbles and stared some more. What had she said?

The truth. Sheâd said the truth.

âHow can I fall in love with Marcus Benson?â she asked herself. âHow can I possibly do that?â

Sheâd done it.

She turned and stared down at the sea. He was still stroking back and forth in steady, even strokes.

âWe have absolutely nothing in common,â she told her cows. âHeâs like some modern-day Prince Charming, Marcus the Magnificent, rushing round rescuing damsels in distress. Itâs all very well being a damsel in distress but it doesnât make for any sort of equal relationship.â

âDo you want an equal relationship?â

âI donât want to feel rescued for the rest of my life.â

âYes, you do.â

âNo.â She was talking to herself, to the cows, to anyone whoâd listen. She had two sides of her brain competing. Or maybe it was her head and her heart.

âHeâd come up my end of the veranda,â she told her cow. âIf I pressed.â

âYou wouldnât have to press. You know darn well what it

feels like whenever we touch. He feels it, too. I know he does. And heâs a male.â

âAre you suggesting a spot of seduction?â

âYouâre married to him. Itâs hardly illegal.â

âAre you out of your mind? In two weeks heâll go away andâ¦â

âAnd break your heart.â

Head and heart converged right there. The truth was unpalatable but it was unescapable.

âYouâve really fallen for him, havenât you?â she whispered.

âMaybe I have,â she whispered back. âBut itâs not the knight in shining armour I want. Orâ¦not very much. Itâs the man who makes Harry laugh. The man who cares for his assistant. Who makes Ruby smile. Who makes my heart twistâ¦â

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

âSo keep on with what youâre doing,â she told herself. âKeep it light. Keep it distant. And above all, keep your heart intact.â

âYour heart hasnât been intact for five days.â

âIt has to be.â

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Peta finished milking and returned to the house to find Harry packing sausages into a picnic basket.

âBeach night,â he said as she paused in the kitchen door.

Beach night. It was a custom theyâd had for years. On a warm, still night like this theyâd take their dinner to the beach, light a fire and cook it there. Theyâd swim and eat and return to the house at dusk.

It was a great idea. Butâ¦ Was it a great idea when Marcus was around?

âHeâs still down there,â Harry told her. âI went to see and heâs gone for a run. Heâs just a dot on the horizon. I reckon we could get the campfire burning before he comes back.â

âI thoughtâ¦ Wonât he want to cook? He bought lots of ingredients this morning.â

âItâs our turn to cookâand we make great sausages,â Harry retorted. âIâll watch them so you donât even get to burn them.â

âGee, thanks.â

âGo get your swimsuit,â he told her. âHurry up.â

âButâ¦â

âBut what?â

Butâ¦ She just knew it wasnât wise. Help.

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Theyâd done this often. They were expert. By the time Marcus returned from his run, they had the fire burning and there was already a bed of hot coals. Theyâd scooped the flame from the centre and the sausages were sizzling in their pan. Marcus had seen the smoke in the distance and, as his jogging slowed to a walk, he realised they were here and waiting for him. The smell of sausages reached him and he had no need of Harryâs shouted announcement.

âWeâre having a barbecue. Come and get it.â

Peta looked up from turning the sausages. She had on a swimming costume, but sheâd thrown an oversized T-shirt over it. A pityâ¦

âHey, great pecs,â Harry called and he suddenly thought an oversized T-shirt was a really good idea. Peta was smiling at him and heck, he felt like blushing.

âCut it out,â he growled.

âAre you brave enough to eat one of my sausages?â Peta was saying, taking pity on him but still smiling. Harry hastened to reassure him.

âIâve done most of the cooking and the cake for afterwards is one you guys bought at the bakers today.â

âSo I neednât worry about being poisoned?â he asked and watched Petaâs smile widen. She had the loveliest smileâ¦

âMy cookingâs not that bad.â

âYes, it is,â Harry said cheerfully. âHow many sausages, Marc? Three or four?â

âSix.â He sank down on the picnic rug. Sausages were something he normally wouldnât consider but they looked great. Heâd been outside all day. He was starving, he realised. Even if Peta had burned themâ¦

âIf youâre hungry enough youâll eat anything,â she said, as if reading his thoughts. âCooking classes are a waste of time.â

âAnd cooks are a waste of time?â

âIâm sure whateverâs important to you is your own business,â she said primly and he grinned at the twinkle behind her green eyes. She had the capacity to tease. To make him smile

inside. To make him feelâ¦

Heck, to make him feel as if he did want to save her. To take her as his Cinderella and turn her into his companion for life. If she could always be here. Laughing at him. Gently mocking. Making his life light from withinâ¦

Stupid thought. Brought on by hunger and by sausages. He made a frantic attempt to haul his sensesâall his sensesâback to what was most important.

âDid you bring ketchup?â he asked.

âKetchup?â Harry looked nonplussed.

âHe means sauce,â Peta told him. âHe talks American.â

âYou should learn Australian,â Harry said, handing over the sauce bottle. âItâs not really even sauce. Itâs dead horse. You say pass the dead horse and every Australian knows what you mean. So I guess dead horse is Australian for ketchup.â

âI have a lot to learn,â Marcus said faintly.

âYou do,â Harry agreed. âYouâre going to have to hurry up to fit it all into two weeks.â

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They ate their sausages and their chocolate cake and then Peta went for a swim. Harry disappeared back to the houseâto finish his volcanoes. Maybe Marcus should have gone, too, but how could he leave Peta swimming alone? The fact that he knew for sure she swam alone nearly every day didnât cut it. She was swimming alone now and he was staying.

In truth, he wanted to go back into the water as well, but he couldnât. Something stopped him.

Being in the water with herâ¦ Somehow it seemed like taking a step to her end of the veranda.

So he watched from a distance that was safe enough to almost seem detached. Almost.

She didnât swim as he had. She must be tired, he thought, as he watched her float on her back and gaze up into the flame-filled sunset. Sheâd been up since five this morning and for most of that time sheâd been working hard. Her ankle *must* be hurting. She had no need to stretch her muscles as he had. She was content just to float.

She was content.

There was the difference, he thought. That was why he was so attracted to her. She wasâ¦peaceful. Sheâd settled back into her lot with joy. All she wanted was her farm and a future for her brothers. She had no need of anything else.

Problems that would fester and sour in others were nothing to her. The locals seemed to have sent her family to purgatory. She had little money and even less in the way of material possessions. Her future was bound by this tiny farm.

She wouldnât want what he had to offer, he thought, and the thought jarred.

Was he offering?

He didnât know.

Butâ¦ Was he offering? The thought stayed. Like an insidious fleck of some matter heâd never heard of, it nestled in his brain and grew.

She was lovely. She made him smile. If he could take her back with him to the USâ¦ Turn her into his real happy ever afterâ¦

She wouldnât leave Harry.

She could bring him, too.

Theyâd never desert this farm.

He could put a farm manager in, he thought. Keep it safe for them. For their future.

What the hell was he thinking?

Nothing, he decided fiercely, or nothing that made sense. Heâd decided early that he was a loner. What had changed now?

Peta had changed. Peta had changed him.

He watched her float on, desperate to join her but forcing himself to stay. Forcing himself to be sensible. By the time she emerged from the water he almost had himself convinced that his thoughts were a nonsense.

She came up the beach towards him, smiling, shaking her head with the water from the curls forming a glistening arc around her head. The dogs went flying down the beach to meet her and then wheeled away to chase gulls, to chase their tails, to simply soak up the warmth of the gathering dusk. Marcus sat back on the sand and watched Peta towel her hair, smile down at him, simplyâ¦simply be.

This was a sensation heâd never experienced before. For the last half hour heâd sat and done nothing, simply let the night

soak into him. The place. The time.

Peta.

âYouâre lovely,â he said softly and his words hung in the night with a promise of something that was as yet undisclosed.

She stopped towelling and stared down at him. Sheâd giggle, he thought, or disclaim. Or arch her browsâ¦ Heâd seen it all.

Instead she smiled, a gentle smile that was almost sympathetic.

âYouâre not bad yourself.â

âGee, thanks.â It was inane but it was all he could manage. He swung himself to his feet and took her towel. âLet me do that?â

She pulled away, ducking under the towel and backing.

âYou donât want to.â

âTowel your hair? I do. Very much.â

âYou know what I mean.â Her smile had died. âThe up close and personal bit isnât going to work.â

âWhy not?â

âNeither of us are in a position to take it further.â

âWe have two weeksâ¦â

Wrong thing to say. Her face shuttered and the barriers went up. He could see it.

âKeep to your own end of the veranda, Marcus,â she told him. âOr maybe itâd be better if you went back to Aunt Hattieâs.â

âNo!â Keep it light, he told himself desperately. Keep it light. âAnything but that. Please donât condemn me to drown in pink.â

âThen donât touch me.â

âWhy donât you want to be touched?â

âWho said I didnât want to be touched?â

âI assumedâ¦â

âYou assume all over the place,â she said crossly. âYou assume and assume and assume. I needed to accept your very generous offer to marry me and save my farm but that doesnât make me inclined to see you as Mr Wonderful for the rest of my life.â

âI didnâtââ

âWant to be Mr Wonderful? No. Of course you didnât. You donât want to be up on a pedestal, and I donât want to keep you

there. But when you come downâ¦â She took a deep breath. âYou see, the problem is that when you come down from your pedestal, Marcus, then I see you just as a person. Or, not just as a person. As Marcus. Marc. Someone whoâs as needful as me. Someone whoâs even more lonely. And whoâs lovely and generous and who smiles and makes me feel crinkly inside andâ¦ Marcus, no, I didnât meanâ¦ I donât meanâ¦â

He didnât get to hear what she didnât mean. How could he? Standing there with her hair dripping and her green eyes luminous and her face earnest, she was so obviously trying, trying to sort it in her mind, to tell the truth, and heâd have to be inhuman not to react.

She was so lovely. She gazed up at him and he reached forward and took her hands in his and their eyes locked and held.

Afterwards he couldnât remember who had moved first. Whether sheâd stood on tiptoe and tilted her chin so her face met his, or if it had been he whoâd drawn her into him and whoâd cupped her face and tilted those lipsâ¦

No matter. Nothing mattered. Nothing mattered but that her body was being drawn into his and all he could feel was the warmth of her, the feel, the softness of the curves of her body against him. Dear heaven. The way her still damp body curved into his, her breasts moulding to his chest, her body melting, her lips tasting of sea and salt and warmth and desire andâ¦

Peta.

He didnât know whether he said the word. Whether he said her name. He couldnât. How could he kiss and speak at the same time?

But it was as if he shouted it. It was as if his whole being was an exultant cry. Peta!

She was his. His! His hands held her, linking around the small of her back, tugging her closer, loving her, wanting her.

Loving her.

The world stopped right there. Or maybe it started. It was as if his heart had stopped and then started afresh, anew, and he was someone else. The wonder. The joy.

Heâd never known he could feel like this. All his lifeâ¦ The barrenness of his childhood. The awfulness of his time in the army. The knowledge that he could never let anyone close. That

people disappeared all the time. The dreadful time in the Gulf, learning for the first time about friendship only to have it blasted to bits before his eyes. The years of business where all that mattered was money; where employees were people you treated with consideration because that way they worked best but you never, ever got involvedâ¦

He was involved now. He was involved right up to his heart.

And this woman was his wife. His wife! What miracle was this?

The kiss deepened. She was surrendering to him. Her lips had parted and he was plundering her mouth, taking the kiss deep, deeperâ¦

Dear heaven, he wanted her. Her wanted her more than life itself. More than heâd ever dreamed he could want a woman.

âPetaâ¦â

The kiss lasted for ever. The waves rolled in and out; the dogs wheeled back to them, vaguely worried at their immobility but fast bored. They wheeled away again. All except Ted-dog, who lay at his mistressâs feet and softly whined, as if in warning.

She was heeding no warning. Sheâd given herself up to this moment, to the taste of him, to the feel of him. To the sensation he was feeling and that he knew she must feel, too. Here was her man and here was his woman. Man and woman. One.

It had to end. Somehow it had to end. The dusk was turning to night. The next move had to come and it had to come from him.

He pulled back somehow, and he stared down into her face. She looked up at him, her eyes confused, tender, but there was still that wonderful smile. The laughter that had been there the first time heâd seen her. The laughter that caught and heldâ¦

âIt seemsâ¦ Peta, it seems that indeed you are my wife,â he said in a voice he hardly recognised. âMy wife.â

Her smile faded. âWhat do you mean by that? âIndeed you are my wifeâ¦ââ

âWe made vows.â

âNo.â She backed away, a trace of fear washing over her face. âNo, we didnât mean them.â

âWe didnât mean them but theyâre coming true.â

âTo have and to hold?â

âThatâs the one.â

âIn sickness and in health. Until death us do part. To love and to cherish. To be one. I donât think so, Marcus.â

âMaybe not,â he said slowly. Not that. Not a complete joining. She was beautiful, he thought. She was the most desirable thing. Butâ¦ Somehow he forced his confused mind to think. Somehow.

He was a loner. Heâd been raised to be a loner; it had been instilled in him since birth and how could he change that now?

Butâ¦ She was a loner, too. She was independent. She wasnât a clinging vine. Sheâd take what he could give.

âNo,â she said and he stared.

âNo?â

âI know what youâre about to suggest and I want no part of it.â

âPeta, weâre married.â

âWeâre not married.â

âAre you denying you want me?â

âOf course I want you,â she said shortly. âOf course I do. You can feel it. Like I can feel you want me. But itâs not enough. Not nearly enough.â

âWhy not?â

âBecause I want it all,â she said abruptly, her fingers going to her lips as if they were bruised. As they well might be. âAll or nothing. I wonât do less.â

âWhat on earth do you mean by that?â

âIâve fallen in love with you, Marcus.â

Just like that. He couldnât believe sheâd said it. He stood back, stunned.

âI donât know what you mean.â

âI know you donât,â she whispered. âBut oh, Marcus, I want you to know. I want you to learn.â

âWhat theâ¦â

But her face had closed. âIâm being stupid,â she whispered. âIâm looking for the fairytale. Stupid, stupid, stupid. And itâs time for us to go home.â She stooped and lifted the picnic basket, breaking eye contact. He felt it. It hurt. It was a withdrawal and it hurt more than he could have imagined it would have. âIâm sorry. I should never have kissedâ¦have let you kissâ¦.â

âWe both wanted it.â

âI know. But notâ¦to take it further.â

âWe could,â he said urgently. âPeta, listen. This love thing. I donât know it. Iâve neverânever dreamedâ¦ But you, what I feel for youâ¦ Iâm prepared to take a chance.â

âThatâs big of you.â

âNo.â He tried to grasp her hands but she stepped back again. âDonât. Peta, listen. Weâre married. Youâre my wife. We could do this. You could have this place as your base while Harry needs you but Iâd rebuild. Iâd make it fit for you. Youâd visit me in New York when I had time to spareâ¦â

âYouâd make this place fit for me?â Her voice was suddenly dangerous.

âItâs a dump, but it could be fabulous. The house siteâcould you imagine what we could build here?â

âAnd youâd visitâ¦how often?â

âMy workâs in New York. But Iâll have spent two weeks here now. Iâll come when I can.â

âThis is sounding more and more romantic.â Her voice said it wasnât romantic at all.

âYou say you love me.â

âI donât love you like that.â

âLike what?â

âLike Iâll give in to you because I love you. Like Iâll take the crumbs because I love you. Iâve fallen hard for you, Marcus. Stupidly hard. But I have the sense to see itâs never going to work.â

âIt will work.â He reached out again. This time he caught her hands and she froze.

âLet go of me.â

âPetaââ

âI said let go. Iâve told you. The dogs are trained.â

âYouâre saying youâll set the dogs on me?â His voice rose incredulously.

âI surely will.â

His own anger rose then. What sort of a game was she playing? âHell, Peta, if I leave, if I go back to the States tomorrow youâre sunk.â

âYouâre saying youâll call this whole thing off because I wonât sleep with you?â she demanded. âBecause I wonât fit in

with your crazy plans for a mock marriage then youâll let Charles have the farm?â

He froze. What the hellâ¦? âOf course not. Iâm not into blackmailing.â

She stared at him for a long moment, her anger turning icy. âThatâs good then,â she said at last. âSo youâre not blackmailing me and Iâm not doing anything else. Good night, Marcus. Itâd be better if you didnât come near my veranda tonight.â

âButâ¦â

âGood night.â

CHAPTER TEN

WHAT followed were five very strained days.

âDonât you guys like each other any more?â Harry demanded.

âWe like each other,â Marcus told him. He was cookingâa beef casserole with red wine and mushrooms. Harry would eat with him and take home a plateful for Peta to eat when she came in from the dairy.

For sheâd refused to eat with him again. Sheâd put herself to work. Sheâd thrown herself into the farm and Marcus had been free to fend for himself.

It hurtâbut in a sense he accepted it was right. They couldnât come near each other without sparks flying. Heâd asked her to be his wife and sheâd refused. That was her right and in a way it was nothing less than heâd expected. To love a woman was impossible.

To love anyone was impossible.

But heâd become attached to Harryâmore attached than he cared to admit. While Peta spent her time with her cows, avoiding him, Harry hauled his homework to the pink house each night. He gossiped while Marcus cooked or worked on his laptop. He was inquisitive and friendly and bubbly with twelve-year-old enthusiasm, and Marcus knew that when this two weeks was up it wouldnât just be Peta heâd miss.

So why didnât he do something about it?

What could he do? Heâd already asked her to take it further. Heâd offeredâ¦

He hadnât offered enough. He hadnât offered himself.

âIâm a loner,â he told Harry now as they chopped onions over companionable tears. âPetaâs a loner, too. Thatâs why she eats her dinner by herself.â

âShe never eats dinner by herself when my brothers are at home. Itâs just âcos sheâs avoiding you.â

âSo she doesnât like me.â

âOf course she likes you.â

Maybe she likes me too much. The words were there, unsaid. The thoughtâ¦

It made him feelâ¦

Scared. He sliced his last onion and turned to get the steak from the fridge. Giving him time to get his voice in order.

âPeta and I are very different,â he told Harry. âMy lifeâs in New York and Petaâs is here. If we getâ¦attachedâ¦â

âYouâre saying if you eat together you guys might fall in love?â

âNo!â

âYou might.â Harry was an intelligent and perceptive twelve-year-old, and now his face creased into a smile of pleasure. âThatâd be ace.â

âWhy would it be ace?â

âYou could stay here all the time. We could keep your cool little Morgan. You might even drive me to school in it.â

Some plans had to be scotched, and scotched fast. âMy lifeâs in New York.â

âWhy? Youâre working here. You work on the telephone and the computer. You donât have to milk cows for a living.â

âNo, but there are other things.â

âLike what?â

âHarry, you donât have a clue what my life entails.â

âI bet this life is better,â he said solidly.

âI have a Porsche in New York,â Marcus told him, trying to put his decision in terms Harry could understand. But could he understand it himself? He slammed the cleaver through the steak as if it had personally offended him.

âBut youâve got your Morgan here already, and weâve got an ace tractor. Our tractorâs practically veteran.â

âWouldnât you rather have a Porsche?â

âWhy?â

âAll twelve-year-old boys like Porsches,â he said with an air of near desperation.

âI know what Porsches are, of course,â Harry told him. âMy mate Rodneyâs got a bunch of posters up on his wall. And if you brought it out here Iâd love to have a ride. But I donât reckon theyâre as good as Morgans. Is that what you want?â He cocked his head to one side, questioning. âFor Peta to go back to New

York and drive your Porsche?â

âPeta is staying here,â Marcus told him and sliced the steak again. Hard. âAnd Iâm going back to New York. Iâm sticking with my Porsche and Petaâs sticking with her tractor.â

âYeah, but Petaâs got more than the tractor,â Harry said wisely. âSheâs got the cows and the dogs and the house and me.â He grinned up at Marcus, confiding. âYouâre going to have to come up with something better than a Porsche to compete with us.â

âI donât want to compete.â

âPetaâs saying she isnât going to fall in love with you, too,â Harry told him, veering off at a tangent that was as stunning as it was perceptive. âI think the two of you are nuts.â

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Harry and Marcus were down at Hattieâs house making dinner. Peta sat in her dairy longer than she needed. Much longer.

Soon sheâd have to go home. Thereâd be a plate of something delicious in her oven, made by Marcus, brought home by Harry and left for her to eat by herself. Harry thought she was a dope.

He was right. She was a dope.

No. What was happening was dangerous. She knew enough about her own heart to realise how vulnerable she was.

Sheâd fallen so hard. Well, why wouldnât she? she asked herself bitterly. Heâd saved her world. Heâd dressed her as a princess. Heâd swept her off her feet and now he was offering herâ¦

He was offering her his world.

So she should take it.

Be contented with crumbs?

Thatâs what he was offering, she thought. There was no way Marcus was offering his heart. He was holding himself separate, still playing the hero whose life didnât change with the redemption of his heroine.

Yeah, great.

How did Cinderella cope? she thought. Being grateful for the rest of her life. Knowing you owed the whole of your life to one man.

But she could sleep at night in his armsâ¦

Marcus was hardly even offering that, she thought. Yeah, sleep in his arms when it was convenient. And the rest of the timeâ¦ Sleeping here in a great house built with his money, being grateful, being endlessly grateful, or sleeping in that dreadful, cold apartment in New York, being more grateful still.

Stupid.

âThe whole thing is stupid,â she told Ted-dog when his greying head nuzzled her hand in concern. âHeâs dreaming. Heâs playing fairytales and one of us has to be sensible.â

I donât want to be sensible. I want to go down there and eat with them, and laugh with Marcus and enjoy the work heâs helping Harry with, and walk home with him to my veranda andâ¦

âCut it out.â

She had to cut it out. There was no choice.

She gave her dog one final pat and rose to fetch the hose. Sheâd sluice out the dairy. Slowly.

And then sheâd go home to dinner. To bed. Alone.

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It was mid-morning when they came.

Peta was down the paddock, cleaning out a water trough. She saw the car turn into the driveway. Marcus was home, she thought. At nine in the morning it was five at night back in New York so heâd be in mid-conference with someone important. Maybe sheâd better go back to the house and intercept the visitors before they interrupted him.

Maybe if he was interrupted heâd come outâ¦

No. It had only been that first day that heâd spent time with her. He wouldnât come out. Sheâd told him to keep his distance and he obviously agreed.

Who would blame him? That night on the beach had been an aberration. She looked down at herself with a rueful smile. She was coated in mud. The trough had been overflowing and the ground around it was knee-deep mud. The float had blockedâthe float that cut off the water flow when the trough was fullâso sheâd had to wade through mud and realign the float regardless of mess.

Urk.

She wiped her face with the back of her hand and then

wished she hadnât. Yuk.

So who were the visitors?

No one important, she thought. Please.

Â

Marcus was staring at his computer screen and seeing nothing. His razor-sharp mind seemed to have become fluff. Instead of the fierce concentration he applied to his work, his attention kept wandering to the window. Sometimes heâd see her, in her overalls and her gumboots, her hair pulled back from her face but wisping in escaping curls. Sometimes her face would be smudged with dirt. Usually her face would be smudged with dirt. Sheâd be doing something heavy and filthy, like carting buckets or driving the tractor orâ¦

Or any of the things heâd offered to save her from. She shouldnât have to do it. She shouldnât want to!

And there was the rub. Heâd envisaged his happy ever after and she wanted no part of it.

âAre you there, Mr Benson?â The online teleconferencing was in full swing and he should be concentrating. But Petaâ¦

He could see her. She was down the paddock, delving in a trough of some sort. He could see the mud from here.

It lookedâ¦fun?

âIâm here.â It took a huge effort to haul his eyes from the window and back to the screen.

And then he heard a car turn into the driveway.

Great. Heâd have to wrap it up now. Peta was too far away to welcome visitors.

âI need to leave this, gentlemen,â he told the screen, not even caring that the corporate problem they were discussing wasnât near to being resolved.

He had his own problems and they were nothing to do with New York.

Or maybe they were. He walked outside and a car was pulling up before the main house. As he stared in astonishment, out stepped Darrell. Darrell gave him a wave, then walked around the car and opened the passenger door.

Ruby.

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âIt was too complex to do from New York.â

They were all seated on the edge of Petaâs veranda. Peta had brought out lemonade and handed it out like a good hostess. Sheâd ditched her gumboots. Now she sat and swung her feet. One sock had a hole in it. Her toe peeped out.

Marcus was trying to concentrate on two thingsâwhat Ruby was saying and Petaâs toe. If anyone had ever told him heâd find a womanâs toe erotic he would have said they were crazy.

Her toe was driving him wild!

âWhat was too complex to do from New York?â he managed and Ruby beamed. She looked thoroughly pleased with herself. Darrell sat by her side and he, too, looked like the cat that had just got the canary.

What had got into the pair of them?

âItâs about your will,â Ruby said.

âMy will?â

âPetaâs auntâs will,â Ruby told him, as if humouring a child. âFor heavenâs sake, Marcus, focus here.â

Rubyâtelling *him* to focus? âOkay.â He put up his hands as if in surrender. âHattieâs will. What about it?â

âYou asked me to find out about it before you left. There wasnât time for any investigations before you needed to be married, but weâve done it now.â She turned to Peta. âYou told Marcus that your aunt had high calcium levels and was confused in the last weeks of life?â

âIâ¦ Yes.â Peta frowned. âShe *was* a bit confused. She wasnât all that clear when she left here. I was really worried.â

âDid you know that your doctor here took blood samples two weeks before she left Australia?â

âShe was having blood tests all the time.â

âThatâs right.â Ruby pulled a form from her capacious bag. âOne of the forms Marcus had you sign before you left gave us the power to check medical records. We put in a request for the information on the grounds that sheâs now deceased and you stand to lose.â

âHow do I stand to lose?â

âYou stand to lose by her change of will. Thereâs an earlier will leaving you the farm.â

Petaâs frown deepened. âI remember. She always said she

wrote one. But that was well before she went back to the States.â

âOf course it was,â Ruby told her. âAnd we found it. Our lawyers discovered that Hattie wrote a will two years before she diedâlong before she got sickâand she lodged it with a Yooralaa solicitor.â

âWhatâs that got to do with me?â Peta asked.

âThatâs why weâve come,â Ruby said triumphantly. âI knew you two couldnât do the investigations. You had to stay on the farm and be happily married. I was planning on sending one of Marcusâs solicitors but then I thought, maybe I could do it. And Darrell decided to come, too.â For the first time she looked a little disconcerted. Embarrassed, Marcus thought, stunned.

But she was moving on.

âAnd guess what weâve found?â she told them. âHattieâs medical records. Marcus was right. The tests here said her calcium levels were through the roof before she left Australia. Once she had medical attention in the States, her records there confirm it. The calcium levels would force any judge to concede that her judgement was significantly impaired for at least six weeks before her death. Darrell and I have been here for two days and weâve been working hard. Weâve had legal opinions from Australian lawyers and weâve had legal opinions from US lawyers. They concur. The new will doesnât stand, Peta. The farm is yours. Married or not, Charles canât touch you.â

Peta stared, not immediately comprehending. âItâsâ¦ The farmâs mine?â

âItâs yours.â Ruby was still smiling. She cast a sideways glance at Marcus, expecting him to be pleased. âMarcus told me to do everything to get the will overturned. He suspected this.â

âHe suspectedâ¦â

âHe wasnât sure, of course, or heâd never have married you.â

âNo.â Peta looked blankly at Marcus. âNo. Of course he wouldnât.â

âSo now all you have to do is get the marriage annulled,â Darrell told them. And then he, too, smiled. Teasing. âYou can use the old non-consummation line. Unless, of course, you haveâ¦â

âNo,â Marcus snapped. âWe havenât.â

âThatâs good,â Ruby told them, her smile fading. She looked from Peta to Marcus and back again, for the first time seeming to

sense the deep undercurrents running between them. âIâm glad youâve had that much sense.â

âRubyâ¦â

âWell, thatâs what we came to tell you,â she said, setting down her lemonade glass with a definite clink. âAdam and Gloria presented Charles with the legal evidence invalidating the will last night our time. The evidence is indisputable. Peta, the farm is yours and no conditions apply. Soâ¦ Thereâs no need to keep on with the marriage. Iâve brought the annulment forms. If you both sign them you can go on with your lives as if this had never happened. Marcus, thereâs no need for you to stay.â

âNo.â

âUnless you want to,â she added. âYou really could do with a holiday.â

âThis isnât much of a holiday,â Marcus told her and Peta flushed.

âOur accommodation isnât quite five-star,â Peta muttered. She, too, lay down her glass and turned to Marcus. âSo you can go home?â

âYes.â There was nothing else to say.

âI need to thank you. So muchâ¦â

âThereâs no need.â

âThere is.â It was an absurdly formal little tableau but there seemed no right way to go forward from here. âI canâtâ¦ I donât know how to repay you. If I could think of anythingâ¦â

âMy offer still stands,â Marcus told her while Ruby and Darrell watched in silence.

âWhatâto make our marriage last?â

There was an audible intake of breath from Ruby but Marcus didnât move his gaze from Peta.

âThatâs right.â

âMarriage when you can fit me around the edges.â

âDonât be ridiculous,â he told her. âWe could do this. If youâd be prepared to give it a chanceâ¦â

âIt doesnât have a chance.â

âWhat doesnât have a chance?â Ruby demanded and Peta turned to her, despairing.

âHe wants to build me a mansion, right here, instead of my veranda. He wants to visit for a couple of weeks a year and for the rest of the time he wants to install me in his black marble

apartment and keep his bed warm for the twenty minutes a day he can spare for me.â

âThatâs not fair,â Marcus snapped.

âWhat else are you offering?â

âI run a financial empire, Peta,â Marcus told her. âIâve never asked anyone else to marry meâ¦â

âAnd I should be really grateful,â Peta told him. âIâm sure Cinderella did it really well. But not me.â

âWhat else do you want?â They were almost unaware that Ruby and Darrell were staring, agog. This was too important to be distracted.

âYou.â

âI donât know what you mean.â

âThen figure it out,â Peta told him. She sighed and her shoulders slumped as the rest of the world appeared to enter her consciousness again. She turned and faced Ruby and Darrell. âIâm sorry. Youâve been so good. Do you have to go back to the States immediately or can I put you up here for a night or so? My accommodationâs pretty basic.â

âIt looks great to me,â Darrell told her. He looked sideways at Marcus. âIâve spent months on a battlefield. Marcus has, too. Iâve no need for marble tiles.â

âWill you go straight home?â Ruby asked Marcus and Marcus tried to get his addled brain to think. He might as well. This was stupid. What was Peta expecting? That he share her gumboots? He hadnât worked so hard all his life for this.

âYeah,â he told them. âI will.â

âI havenât had a holiday for years,â Ruby told him, still eyeing him with a dubious look that said her mind was running at a tangent. âDo you mind if I stay on?â

âGo for it. Just as long as you like pink.â

âThereâs nothing wrong with pink,â Peta flashed. âIf youâre happy you donât notice.â

âOf course you notice.â

âGet a life, Marcus,â she told him.

âItâs you whoâs refusingâjust because you donât like black marble.â

âIf you think thatâs the reason Iâm refusing then you have rocks in your head,â she told him. âIâm refusing because you

canât see that itâs not important. That Iâve offered the only thing thatâs important and you havenât a clue how to return it. And Iâm not even sure that you want to. Ever.â

Â

He left half an hour after Harry returned from school. He could have left earlier but the thought of leaving before saying goodbye to the kid was almost impossible.

And saying goodbye even then was incredibly hard.

âI sort of hoped you guys might have made it long term,â Harry told him, trying not to let his almost-manly chin wobble. âI sort of liked cooking. And you helping with projects and stuff.â

âYour brothers will be home soon.â

âYeah, but they donât stay and theyâre not the same. And you made Peta smileâ¦â

âOnly at the start.â

âYeah, but you could again if you wanted to,â Harry said with perspicacity. âCouldnât you?â

There was no answer to that. âI have to go.â

âDid you say goodbye to Peta?â

âSheâs milking.â

âYouâre mean,â Harry said. His jaw set a little and he moved around Marcusâs car and gave a kick to the tyre. âI thought you were a friend.â

âHarryâ¦â

âSee you.â He picked up his school bag and sloped off into the house.

Darrell and Ruby were nowhere to be seen. Peta was in the dairy.

There was no one to watch him drive away.

He went.

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Peta was putting cups on one of her favourite cows when she heard his engine start. She turned and watched as his lovely little Morgan turned out of the driveway and headed out towards the highway.

Terrific. He was gone.

She put her head on the cowâs warm flank and wept.

Â

âAre you going to tell me what that was all about?â

It was late that night. Darrell and Harry had both gone to bed, Harry reluctantly but Darrell because his head was still halfway between New York and Australia. Peta and Ruby were left alone. They gravitated towards the veranda and sat, watching the moon out over the ocean.

âAre you saying he really asked you to stay married to him?â Ruby demanded and Peta nodded.

âYou heard him. Sort of.â

âAre you intending to explain?â

âHe didnât say he loved me. He just saidâ¦ He figured it could work. He kissed me and he liked it. He enjoyed playing fairy godfather, genie, whatever. Heâd give us more. Build this place up to be a mansion and come and visit for a few weeks each year so he could see how benevolent he was. And I could visit him in New YorkâI think he actually used that word, visitâand stay in his horrible mausoleum of an apartment and be there waiting for him in between corporate necessity.â

âItâ¦it doesnât sound like a romantic kind of proposal,â Ruby said a trifle unsteadily and Peta eyed her with suspicion.

âAre you laughing at me?â

âOh, my dear, Iâd never laugh.â Ruby hesitated and then placed a large hand on Petaâs. âYou did the right thing. He has to seeâ¦â

âHeâll never see.â

âSometimes miracles happen,â Ruby said gently. There was a momentâs silence and then she continued. âFor instance, me and Darrellâ¦â

âNow thatâs something I donât understand.â

âDarrell needs me,â she said simply. She closed her eyes. The sound of the sea intensified in the stillness and when Ruby opened her eyes again there was a peace about her that Peta had never seen. âLifeâs been bleak,â she said. âI couldnât put my pain behind me. But with youâ¦playing brides, seeing what was happening to Marcus while he thought you needed himâ¦ I donât know. I let my guard down for a moment, I guess. And then

Darrell took me home after your wedding and we got to talking. His bodyâ¦ Heâs so scarred and heâs closed off as well. We talked and we talked and weâve been together ever since.â She smiled, a slow soft smile that contained all the joy in the world. âI guess weâll be together for ever. Itâs that simple.â

Itâs that simple.

The words wafted around them. There was joy here, but alsoâ¦

Sadness. Despair.

âHe canât see it,â Peta said.

âYou meanâ¦ You love him?â

âOf course I love him.â

âYou told him?â

âMmm.â

âAnd he ran.â

âNo. He offered me marriage. On terms.â

âFor a billionaire, he really is a dope,â Ruby told her.

Silence. The silence went on and on. And on.

âWell,â Ruby said at last. âWell. What we need here, girl, is a plan.â

âA plan?â

âItâs what Marcus is principally good at. Corporate plans. Takeovers. Strategies. Heâs spent eight years teaching me how to do it. So letâs get to work.â

âRubyâ¦â

âYou telling me to butt out, girl?â

âNo,â Peta told her, half laughing. âNo. Ruby, I need all the help I can get.â

âSpoken like a true Benson,â Ruby told her. âWe havenât annulled that marriage yet!â

âSo whatâs the plan?â

âSilence.â

âIs that all?â

âHeâs had a taste of something he didnât know existed,â Ruby told her. âLetâs leave him alone to think about it.â

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE telephone service was out of order.

âOut of order?â Marcus had his people contact the telecommunications authorities in Australia, only to be told that the fault had been reported as non-urgent. The people concerned had cellphones. And no, he couldnât obtain those numbers, no matter how much he paid.

He knew Rubyâs cellphone number. She had it turned off. Sheâd sent a fax from the local post office saying sheâd decided to take a month off and learn how to milk cows.

Ruby was milking cows while Marcus wasâ¦

Marcus was earning money. Launching a new range of Internet software. Ruling his empire.

Doing what he always did.

Â

âHow long can silence last?â Peta asked and Ruby paused from her first attempt at milking a cow.

âAs long as it takes. Be patient.â

âI canât.â

âYou can.â

Â

Two weeks. Three.

Marcus took a lunchtime stroll down to Tiffanyâs. He spent a long time staring at the jewel cases and in the end chose a single diamond. Perfect. Flawless. Worth a kingâs ransom.

He insured it for another kingâs ransom and sent it courier.

âTo my Cinderella,â the card read. âPlease reconsider.â

Â

By return courier came a small box containing the diamond and something else. A withered daisy chain.

âIâm not Cinderella. Iâm just me. I love you, Marcus. But I donât want your diamonds.â

Nothing else.

He stared at the note for a long time. So long that his temporary assistant grew nervous.

âAre you okay, Mr Benson?â

âIâm fine,â he told her, his face grim. He handed over the diamond. âCan you arrange to have this returned?â

âOh, Mr Bensonâ¦â The girl looked down at the diamond and let out her breath on an ecstatic sigh. âOh, Mr Benson, any woman would die for a diamond like this.â

âNot my woman,â he said before he could stop himself. âNot the woman I love.â

Â

âAre you sure?â

It was the end of three long weeks and Peta was still staring out at the moon every night. Somewhere under this moon was Marcus. Alone.

âHe has to see,â Ruby told her. âHe has to have time to realise what heâs missing.â She gave a rueful smile. âIt took me more than twenty years to learn to love again. Letâs hope Marcus can do it faster.â

âAnd if he doesnât?â

âThen we panic,â Ruby told her. âBut not yet. Thereâs things we can do.â

Â

Marcus was in a meeting when the next delivery arrived. His secretary interrupted him with apologies. âBut you did ask me to let you know if anything came from Australia.â

Two boxes were waiting.

The first box contained Petaâs wedding dress. Satin, lace, matching shoes, ribbons from her hair. Regardless of the curious eyes of his office staff, Marcus lifted it out. He could smell the perfume sheâd worn that day. There was a small note.

âThank you for the fairytale.â

âThereâs another box,â his secretary told him, obviously agog to see what it held.

He took a gripâsort ofâand opened the second box.

It was a pair of gumboots. His size. And another note.

âReality is more fun.â

He set the gumboots down on the gleaming mahogany desk. Ridiculous.

Fun?

Ridiculous.

Â

The time dragged. He put the gumboots and the wedding dress in the top of his closet and left them there. The concept of him ever needing either again was crazy!

He dated again. Or he tried to date again. The women seemed shallow, pointless, cold.

Petaâ¦

Peta was on the other side of the world.

Sheâd said she loved him. If she loved him why wouldnât she take him? he asked himself. On his terms.

Because, a small voice whispered behind his heart, because his terms wereâ¦cruel?

What heâd offered was all he was prepared to concede, he thought grimly. To promise more was to promise something that he couldnât deliver.

Coward, he told himself.

But to take the next stepâ¦

To take another step was impossible.

Â

Ruby contacted him at the end of the month. For a moment he couldnât believe he was hearing right, and then he excused himself from his meeting and locked himself in his office to take the call where he could concentrate.

âRuby. Where the hell are you?â

âWhere you should be,â she informed him cheerfully. âHere. In Australia. Having a really good time.â

âYouâre my employee.â

âNot any more. I quit. Darrellâs asked me to marry him.â

Silence. He thought of his clinical, efficient assistant who in the years heâd employed her had never let her personal life interfere with her work. Sheâd never had a personal life!

She was marrying his dour, scarred sergeant?

âHeâs lovely,â Ruby said in a voice he hardly recognised. âYou know he is. And weâve decided to stay on and help Peta for a while. This farm really needs more than just Peta to run it. Marcus, I can milk!â

âPetaâs never let you near her cows!â He couldnât believe it.

âIt took time to gain their trust,â Ruby conceded. âA month. Darrell and I have been helping to bring the cows in, getting them used to us, learning each oneâs name. And now I can put the cups on. I can clean the vats. I know all about mastitis and bacteria counts and swishing down the dairyâs my favourite. Oh, Marcus, itâs so much fun.â

âButâ¦you belong here.â

âNo. I belong here. Darrellâs here. No one stares at his scarred face here. Heâs much better at milking than me. Peta says we can redecorate the pink house and live in it for as long as we want. Weâve both got savings and Darrellâs got his veteranâs pension. We can be really comfortable. We donât need much here. Thereâs so much already. We can be really richâwith nothing. Nothing but each other.â

Silence. Marcus sank down on to the desk behind him, aware suddenly that he needed its support.

âYou know that I asked Peta to be married to me?â he said at last. âProperly, I mean.â

âAre you talking about sending her that darned fool diamond?â

âIt cost a fortune,â he snapped and from the other side of the world he could hear the smile crossing Rubyâs face.

âWhy would Peta need a ring that cost a fortune?â

âShe said she loves me.â

âShe told me that, too.â

âSo why wonât she marry me?â

âYou didnât ask her to stay married to you,â Ruby said softly, her voice growing serious. âYou know you didnât.â

âHow the hellâ¦â

âYou asked her to visit you in New York. Visit! You implied sheâd be your society hostess. Your wife in the short periods you had time for her. You told her youâd stay here for a couple of weeks a year. What sort of marriage is that?â

âIf she loved meâ¦â

âSheâd give up her life for you. Is that what you want? Well, maybe she would. Maybe sheâs breaking her heart because she canât.â

âShe can.â

âYou know, the real Cinderella didnât have commitments,â Ruby said gently. âStepping out of rags into riches is all very well if you have nothing to leave behind. Nothing to lose. As I remember, Cinderella had no alternative. But thereâs Harry.â

âHarry could come with her.â

âAnd her three other brothers? Theyâre still really close. Sheâd never leave them. She has an old dog, Ted-dog. You met him. Ted-dog went off his feed last time Peta was in New York. Heâd pine. Soâ¦ Peta has a life here. And what are you offering? Diamonds? Diamonds donât make very good bedtime companions.â

âRubyâ¦â

âItâs your fear,â Ruby told him. âIâve never said this before because Iâve been just the same as you. Dead scared of life. But you know very well that Peta could never accept your offer of riches and position. She loves you.â

âHow can she?â

âOf course she does,â Ruby snapped. âBut you, you donât love her. You love what she could be if she forgot her responsibilitiesâher family, her farmâyet itâs that very loyalty thatâs made you want her. Youâre deceiving yourself, Marcus. Youâre telling yourself youâd like a wife but youâre making it impossible for her to be just that. Youâre a loner. Your offer of marriage to Peta is nothing more than a taunt.â

âRubyâ¦â

âI know, I know,â she said and her tone was suddenly almost cheerful. âThis is no way to speak to my employer. Isnât it lucky I quit?â

Â

He was left alone. With his corporation. His fortune. His position in society. With the black marble in his bathroom.

Hell!

Â

It took three months. Three months when every morning Peta sat

in her dairy and thought of what sheâd left in New York. Three months when the annulment papers werenât served. She should do something about it herself, she thought, but each time she raised it Ruby said, leave it.

âHe wonâtâ¦â

âHe must,â Ruby told her.

Â

And then one morning she could bear it no longer. She woke and found Darrell and Ruby were already bringing in the cows. Harry was preparing his own breakfast, interspersing cornflakes with wedges of chocolate cake Ruby had made the night before. Peta walked into the kitchen: the warmth of the old wood stove reached out to meet her and her ancient dog wuffled around her feet.

And she couldnât bear it.

âHarry, would you mind if I went back to New York for a bit? â she asked, and Harry gave it his careful consideration while he attacked his cornflakes.

âTo fetch Marcus?â

She took a deep breath. âSomeone has to.â

âRuby says we have to wait for him to be sensible.â

âI think Iâve waited long enough.â

Harry thought about it some more. And nodded. âOkay. Ace by me.â

âYouâll be all right here by yourself?â

âDarrell and Ruby will look after me. Will Marcus come, do you think?â

âI hope so.â

âTell him Ruby cooks now. He doesnât have to eat your sausages.â

âIf he loves me heâd eat my sausages.â

âEven Ted-dog doesnât like your sausages,â Harry told her. âBut good luck.â

Â

Marcus emerged from a meeting and his chauffeur was waiting for him. Which was unusual. Robert usually met him at street level. What was even more unusual was his message.

âThereâs someone waiting for you on the fire-escape.â

âWhat do you mean, thereâs someone on the fire-escape?â he demanded.

âJust what I said. Someone with lunch.â Robert smiled and Marcusâs heart gave a lurch.

âIs itâ¦â

âSee for yourself, sir,â Robert told him.

Peta.

Of course it was Peta.

She was sitting on the fire-escape where heâd first met her, only this time she was seated on a step out of range of the swinging door. She was wearing tattered shorts, a faded T-shirt and sandals. She was holding a bag of bagels and a couple of drink containers were by her side.

âHi,â she said and held out her bag. âYou want a bagel?â

âPeta,â he said cautiously and she smiled.

âYep. You remember me?â

Remember her? It was all he could do not to lunge forward and take her in his armsâright now. But her expression forbade it. She was smiling but she was formal. Holding him at armâs length.

âWhat are you doing here?â he managed.

âI thought we could start again.â She bit into a bagel.

âYou thought we could start again?â

âWe could share.â She wiggled over on the step so there was room beside her. âIâve brought enough for two.â

âBut whyâ¦â

âI figured out we started all wrong,â she said. âYou saved me and Iâm very grateful. By the way, I see Charlesâs plate has disappeared from your list of occupants. That makes me even more grateful. But no relationship can exist on gratitude. Ruby says I should leave you a bit longer but I got lonely. So I figuredâ¦ If I was lonely you might be worse. I thought I should come across and see if we can be friends.â

âFriends.â She was still sitting on her step, holding out her bag of bagels. She was taking his breath away. âI donât know whether I can be aâ¦a friend.â

âEveryone needs a friend,â she said, biting into her bagel as if the bagel and not the words were the most important thing.

There was a momentâs pause while she chewed and swallowed. Then she stared down at the bitten bagel, considering where to bite next. Not looking at him. Chatting as if they were casual acquaintances. Nothing more. âAccording to Ruby, you think you can live in isolated splendour for ever,â she told him. âBut black marbleâs not all itâs cut out to be.â

âNo?â

âSit. Eat your bagel.â She held out her bag again and he sat and took one without thinking. The last thing he wanted at this minute was a jelly-filled bagel. âWe get to share,â she said and the seriousness in her voice was unmistakeable.

âShare what?â

âWhat friends share. Bagels. Fire-escape steps. Life.â

âPetaâ¦â

âI love you, you know,â she said conversationally. âYou might have rescued me, but now itâs my turn to try to rescue you. To save you from a lifetime of black marble. If you want saving. But you have to decide. Nowâ¦ Tell me if Iâm intruding. Robert says youâre busy.â

âIâm always busy.â

âSee, thatâs the thing I donât understand,â she said, licking a jelly-smeared finger with concentration. âYouâre a billionaire already. Youâre busy making money. Why? So you can buy more black marble?â

âNo.â

âSo what else do you want to buy?â

He stared at her. They were seated side by side but sheâd pulled back as heâd sat so she was two feet away from him. Too far.

What did he want to buy?

âA new bed for your veranda?â he said cautiously. âA big one.â

âNow youâre talking.â She beamed. âWhat else?â

âMaybe a jet. So I can commute.â

âWhat, come home at weekends?â

âHome?â

âHomeâs where I am, Marcus,â she said softly. âI love you. Ruby says I should stop saying it, and let you figure it out for yourself, but I canât. I love you so much that I canât bear it a minute longer. I love you, I love you, I love you. And I love you

so much that thereâs no way I can accept your offer of a couple of weeks a year and a few weekends thrown in for good measure. Iâd go crazy. Thatâs the life for someone who wants your position. But I donât want the position, Marcus. I just want you.â

âI canâtâ¦â

âI know. You canât take it in. Thatâs why Iâm here. Now donât panic. Iâm not here for ever. Iâm just here for a little while to seeâ¦ To see if thereâs any possibility that it can work.â She rose, crumpling her empty carrier bag and looking at it ruefully. âThatâs lunch. Finished. But youâve got things to do, places to go. Iâll meet you tomorrow.â

To say he was bewildered would be an understatement. He reached out to grasp her but she backed off fast.

âSame time, same place?â she said. âBagels okay with you?â

âNo!â

âIâm not eating caviar.â

âYou donât have to eat caviar.â He made a lunge but she was fast, dancing down to the next landing and laughing up at him.

âSee you tomorrow. Bye.â

Â

It was a really long day.

Marcus went to his afternoon meeting but he had to excuse himself. He could think of nothing but Peta. Peta of the ragged clothes, the dancing eyes, the lovely voiceâ¦

I love you, I love you, I love you.

People had said it before.

No one had meant it. No one like Peta.

All he had to do was step forward. Risk everything?

Risk what? His independence? His money? His black marble?

Halfway through the afternoon he left the building and made his way to Central Park. And walked. Never before had he walked as he walked that afternoon. He walked and he walked, unaware of where he was going, unaware of the people around him, unaware of anything but Petaâs lovely face and her dancing eyes and her wordsâ¦

I love you, I love you, I love you.

Such a simple thing. To take this stepâ¦

Fairytale heroes had never had it this hard, he thought

ruefully. Find your Cinderella, marry her in all honour, install her in your palace and get on with your life.

His Cinderella had had the happy ending. The white lace and wedding vows. His Cinderella wanted more.

A friend? A friend as well as a hero?

And finally he found he was smiling. The longer he walked the more he smiled.

She was no Cinderella. She was his own lovely Peta. Sheâd sent back the white lace and offered him gumboots instead. Heâd ignored her offer. So sheâd followed him. She was doing her own rescuing. She was offering himâ¦

He knew what she was offering him. The world.

The world his mother had taught him to believe in was a world where the white lace was everything. Heâd rejected that, but he hadnât seen that there was an alternative.

A lovely, lovely alternative called Peta.

Where was she?

She wouldnât be staying at the same dangerous place sheâd stayed at last time, he thought. No! Almost as soon at the thought entered his head he was in a cab heading across town.

She wasnât there.

At least she wasnât staying somewhere dangerous. The thought was a little comforting but not very.

Where the heck was she?

Sheâd meet him same place, same time tomorrow? Could he wait that long? Short of phoning every hotel in New York it seemed he had no choice.

Dammit, what was money for? He headed back to his offices, put his staff on to the job and together they phoned every hotel in New York.

No Peta. Whereâ¦?

He travelled across town to Rubyâs and then to Darrellâs apartments. Both of them were locked and deserted.

There was nothing else he could do. He just had to wait.

Orâ¦ Maybe there was something he could do. Maybe there were a few thingsâ¦

CHAPTER TWELVE

SHE sat on the fire-escape and waited. To say she felt ridiculous would be an understatement. What was she doing? Sitting on a fire-escape with a bag of bagels, waiting for a New York billionaire to come and share them with her?

Waiting for him to figure out what she was trying to do. Waiting for him to see that it was important.

Twelve. Twelve-thirty. He was running late.

Running late? What, was she crazy? Late for what? Late for his bagel?

The door swung open. And it was Marcus. Heâd obviously just come from a meeting of some sortâhe was wearing the lovely Armani suit sheâd seen the first time she met him.

He was carrying his briefcase. And a shopping bag.

âGood afternoon,â he said gravely and she gave him a tiny, faltering smile.

âHâ¦hi.â

âBagels again?â

âI like bagels.â She knew she sounded defensive but she couldnât help it.

âCan I sit down?â

âSure.â She edged along on her step and eyed him sideways. âBe my guest.â

He sat. He propped his shopping bag against the railings, set his briefcase between the two of them and flipped it open.

âI brought my contribution. I hope to heaven it hasnât spilled. Sam assured me the container was safe.â

âYour contribution?â

âClam chowder and corn flapjacks. I remembered that you like them.â

âI do,â she said cautiously and watched as he hauled two bowls, two spoons, two plates from his case. âYou want to share my bagels?â

âThatâs the plan. If you share my chowder.â

âDeal.â

He didnât say anything more. He served his chowder, they

split the flapjacks and they ate. The silence between them was strange but not strained. The sun was warm on their faces. For now, they were content to eat and let what was passing between them hold sway.

It was a really strange meal, Peta thought, but there was such a warmth running between them. Such a force ofâ¦love? They were a foot apart but she could feel his strength as if he was holding her. He was smiling. He looked as if he was smiling inside.

Somewhere inside her, something started to sing.

âToo bad if someone wants to use the fire-escape,â she murmured and Marcus attempted to look grave.

âThey can find their own. This oneâs taken. For however long we need it.â

âItâs a shame we canât settle here for ever,â she said softly. âOn neutral territory.â

âIâve been meaning to talk to you about that.â

âYou have?â

âThis love thingâ¦â He set down his plate and turned to her. And waited while she set down her plate. âIâm not very good at it,â he confessed.

âYou have the basic ingredients.â

âYeah, but not the recipe.â

âIâm sure we could teach you. Me and Harry and Ruby and Darrell and Ted-dogâ¦â

âI think you already have,â he said softly.

There was definitely a singing thing going on inside her. Marcus was smiling at her. Smiling with her. He wasnât moving towards her, but he didnât need to. This big, smiling man with the eyes that had seen far too much but had finally found their home.

With her.

She smiled back at him, and somehowâ¦ Somehow right at that moment she knew that it would be okay.

Thereâd be a place for them. Thereâd be some way they could do this.

âI have a couple of gifts,â he told her and her joy faltered a little.

âMarcus, I donât want diamonds.â

âNo jewels at all?â His face fell. He felt in his jacket pocket and brought out a jewellerâs box.

Nestled on white velvet was indeed a jewel but this was no diamond. It was a twistâa knot of strung silver, breathtakingly simple and breathtakingly lovely. Embedded in the web of silver strands were three tiny sapphires. Tiny but perfect. They glistened in the sunlight, and in their depths was the colour of Petaâs eyes, the colour of the sea.

âItâs a ring made specially for you,â Marcus told her. âBecause of who you are. Because of what you are. I know you donât want tiaras and ball-gowns but I needed to do something to express my love for you.â Then, as she opened her mouth to speak, he placed his finger on her lips. âAnd thereâs more. I might as well get it over and done with. Show you the full catastrophe.â

He flipped up the shopping bag. Out tumbledâ¦gumboots?

They werenât just gumboots, though. They were gumboots with attitude. They were amazingâas if Frida Kahlo had used each as a blank canvas for the most amazing artwork Peta had ever seen.

There were four gumboots. Four stunning pieces of art. Two Petaâs size. Two Marcusâs size.

âI had to move heaven and earth to have a friend do these for us,â Marcus said. âHeâs sealed them so we can use them in the dairy. Together.â

She gasped. She held a gumboot up and turned it around, awed. âYou think the cows will let us milk with these on?â

âI think the cows will love them. When they get used to them.â

âHow can they get used to them,â Peta whispered, âin two weeks a yearâ¦?â

âWell, thereâs another thing we need to discuss,â Marcus said. âNow I know you love your veranda. And I know you wonât let the boys sleep at your end. But would you look at this? â

From the depths of his briefcase he hauled out a set of plans and, while she sat in stunned silence, he spread them out for her perusal. The wind was starting to rise, so he spread them over the landing and weighed each corner down with a gumboot.

âPlans,â he said in satisfaction.

âPlans?â

âHereâs your veranda. Itâs turned into a master bedroom in the plans but itâs still very much a veranda.â

âMarcusâ¦â She shook her head in bewilderment. âI told you. I donât want a mansion.â

âWill you cut it out?â He was grinning at her. âPeta, thereâs a huge gap between your veranda and what the rest of the world calls a mansion. I think weâre pretty safe adding extravagances like, say, a hot shower.â

âA showerâ¦â

âI know. Sheer luxury,â he retorted. âA friendâMaxâhas made these plans up. Heâs worked from my memory and he worked in a rush but itâs a start. Your veranda, although I hope we can rename it *our* veranda, stays intactâalmostâthough the holes in the floorboards will have to go. The kitchen, I loveâand so do youâso that stays as well. Just restored as it should be. Heâs added a big living room out the back for when the boys come homeâsomewhere they can entertain their friends. A bedroom for each of them. Two bathrooms. Now I know two bathrooms sounds a lot but hey, I swear it still doesnât rank as a mansion. I bet your everyday run-of-the-mill mansion has at least four.â

âMarcusâ¦â

âAnd this bit out here is the office,â he told her, and she heard, for the first time, a hint of real anxiety in his voice. âI thoughtâ¦seeing Rubyâs staying there anyway we could set up a base. I could delegate a lot of the responsibility to our top people here, and Ruby and I could work with teleconferencing, faxes, the Internet. I mean, we are an Internet company. It does seem reasonable. Mind, Iâd probably need to visit New Yorkâtwice a year, maybe, but for not more than ten days or so. If I promised faithfully not to use first-class travel and put my knees under my chinâ¦ What do you think, Peta?â

What did she think? Her world was exploding around her, shards of joy bursting in all directions. He was looking at her with such a look of anxiety. Her Marcus.

Her love.

âYouâd sit in economy class for me?â

âIâd sit anywhere for you.â

âEven on a fire-escape?â

âIf you were there.â

âMarcus, Iâd stay in a black marble apartment if you were there,â she admitted and the look of anxiety faded.

âReally?â

âReally.â

âWill you wear my ring?â

Once again, that absurd anxiety. She looked down at the tiny velvet box and there was no choice. She lifted the ring and slipped it on her finger. It glistened in the sunlight; she held it out and she fell in love all over again.

âOh, Marcus. Itâs lovely.â

âReally?â

âReally.â She faltered. âI should have something for you.â

âYou have you. You have your love.â

âWillâ¦will you wear gumboots for me?â she said in a voice that wasnât quite steady.

He kicked off his shoes and his spectacular gumboots were on his feet in an instant. She looked down at them and she managed a shaky chuckle. âTheyâre wonderful.â

âDid you know that I fell in love with your bare toe?â he asked and she looked at him with wonder in her eyes.

âHow can that be?â

âSexiest toe Iâve ever seen. Just like Cinderella.â

âMarcusâ¦â

âMmm.â

âDo you intend to kiss me or will I kiss you?â

âWell, thereâs a problem.â

âA problem?â Her heart felt as if it must surely burst. Her Marcus. Her loveâ¦

âIâm a bit worried about this fairytale thing we appear to be stuck in,â he admitted and stared down at his gaudy feet. âMy feet are already transformed. If you kiss me, will I turn into a frog?â

âLetâs try, shall we?â she whispered. âLetâs try really hard. And if you turn into a frogâI promise to keep right on loving you. Marcus Frog. Marcus Anything. Iâm yours for ever.â

EPILOGUE

A WEEK later they were heading homeâhome to another wedding ceremony that was even simpler than the first but far, far more important. Marcus ushered her on board his jet; he took her into his arms and, as the jet soared to cruise altitude, he silenced her protests with a kiss.

But he couldnât silence her for ever.

âMarcus, this is obscene! You promised me that you wouldnât fly first class. And thisâ¦â

âWhy? Whatâs wrong with it?â He was inclined to be indignant.

âThis is soâ¦ First class has nothing on this!â

âI know,â he said smugly. âThis is nothing like first class. First class, by definition, is the set of seats for those with more money than the normal passenger. The seat youâre sitting on is the seat for the normal passenger. Therefore, itâs economy. Cattle class.â

âItâs your own private jet.â

âYep. And youâre in the economy section. Get used to it.â

But still she was stunned, torn between indignation and laughter.

âMarcus, how much did it cost to get those gumboots painted?â

âDo you care?â

âYes!â

But he was smiling. âMy love, weâll do good things with our money,â he told her. âWise things for the needy. Sensible things for our family and for our farm. For the good of our cows and our dogs and our kids. And weâll do fun things. Fun things just for us. Iâve worked too hard for my fortune not to derive some pleasure from it.â His smile deepened. âLike the money I spent to pay out Charlesâs lease so that neither you, nor I, nor any of our employees have to see the man again.â

âMarcusâ¦â Once again heâd left her speechless.

âMind, I canât help feeling almost sorry for the man,â Marcus told her gently. âHeâs just soâ¦stupid. He canât see that all heâs

hurting is himself.â He smiled softly into her hair. âMaybe he needs to find his own Cinderella,â he whispered. âBut heâs not having mine. Mineâs taken. Nowâ¦ What do we do in economy seats? Do we put our knees under our chins? I think I promised to do that, and Iâm prepared to do whatever it takes to make you happy. Or will you kiss me instead, my love? What do you think? Take your pick.â

Take your pick. He was incorrigible. Peta tried to glare but it didnât come off. Instead she chuckled but her chuckle was drowned as his lips met hers and she was kissed as heâd never stopped kissing her and he never would.

Their seats inched back to reclining. Man and woman, loving each other. For ever.

Heading homeward, for a life togetherâin the worldâs most extraordinary gumboots!

ISBN: 978-1-4268-8150-3

THE LAST-MINUTE MARRIAGE

First North American Publication 2005.

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